

Thirteen Ways To Say Goodnight

Guardian1

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Summary

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Description:

Amarant Coral searches for redemption. Irontail Fratley searches for peace. Both men are ten years and one woman too late. Ongoing.

1. life intervenes: the normal life

Thirteen Ways To Say Goodnight

prologue
(life intervenes)

I sometimes wonder when life became so goddamn tired.

Amarant Coral looked disconsolately at a spot directly in front of him, eyes glazing over slightly as he not-listened to the tiny ruler of Alexandria babble on happily about Lindblum or Eiko or something or other, her hands resting peacefully on her lap. She was currently very roundly pregnant, and her first child was playing in the background with what was obviously a pretend sword; every so often she looked at Amarant in frightened awe, childblue eyes wide with fascinated curiosity, so he bared his teeth at her obediently to send her into a wave of terrified

happiness. Maybe he was going soft, but any kid who Zidane had had the gall to call Cornelia needed some damn encouragement anyway.

Hah. ‘Prince Consort’ Zidane. What a title. Well, with Garnet’s sprog and one on the way he was obviously doing well in the consorting business.

“... well, that’s Eiko for you, I suppose; barely seventeen and already her first airship being built. Cid’s so proud, I think he practically exploded. Have you dropped in to see her?”

His brain wasted a few seconds before he realized that there was a question with a response wanting, so he shook his head. “Didn’t bother. Only got here couple of days ago.”

“What’s the world like?” Garnet asked gently.

“Same as the first time ’round I saw it.”

The girl — woman now, he realized — laughed at that, high and sweet. “You haven’t changed.”

“You haven’t either.”

“Really?” Garnet reached up to touch her dark hair teasingly, shining in the spring sunlight. “No grey hairs or wrinkles?”

He grunted. “You’re only twenty-six. Not yet.”

“Was it just me or was that a compliment?” She smiled at him easily and made him huff once more in annoyance, leaning back in his chair. “But really, Eiko would be so pleased to see you. We missed you very much. We were beginning to think you were, well, dead.”

Hah. Now that was a laugh.

“Zidane’ll be glad to see you when he gets back. If you wait ’till tomorrow night, he can —”

“Garnet.”

The queen blinked at being interrupted so abruptly and looked at the man before her. Amarant was timeless, even his clothes changing little from the last time she had seen the bountyhunter a little under ten years ago; she had almost forgotten how his head worked beneath the fall of crimson hair. Unless he had changed a great deal, he would not have come here for a pleasant social visit.

“You’ve been nattering on for the past hour ’bout absolutely nothing. And I *mean* nothing.”

She blinked again, wide-eyed with innocence. This had been one of the most uncomfortable hours

of her life, but one could not rule over a city without being an excellent diplomat. Garnet wondered idly if she was just making things worse. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ll visit Eiko later.” *Like when I have a masochist death wish and want to die of annoyance.*

“She’ll like that. I’m glad you dropped in on me.” She took a quiet breath and rested her head back on the chair, looking at him pointedly, the gaiety in her eyes dropping as her mouth grew tense. “Amarant, I want to ask you something.”

The big man stared at her, arms folding across his chest. “What?”

“Why did you go away?”

His body language tensed, and she winced inwardly. She was always too direct. If only Zidane was here; he would have wormed it out of him in a less tactless way than she had always been accustomed to. Garnet had always had trouble dealing with Amarant.

“Why d’you want to know?”

“Because of what happened afterwards,” she said honestly.

Fingers gripped the edge of his chair, tightening surreptitiously. He would not show weakness in front of her. “What happened afterwards?”

Head dropping, she stared down at her lap, eyes closing as the grief washed over her all over again. “... I knew you didn’t know.”

“*Damnit, Garnet, what the fuck happened afterwards?*” Amarant stiffened as if remembering something, and shook his head to clear it. “Freya — what’d Freya say? If you don’t tell me, I’ll damn well go to her, whether she wants to tell me or not. Don’t beat around the bloody bush with me —”

“You won’t, Amarant.” Her tone was infinitely gentle. “Freya’s dead.”

“...what?”

There was a horrific sort of everything in that single sound, written on his face, burnt in his eyes — if she had taken the time out to separate them all it would have taken years. This was the hardest thing she’d ever had to do and the grief she felt had suddenly been broke open once more, losing the incredibly dear Burmecian dragoon. It had been so unbearably pointless. “She died a year or so after you left.”

“Somebody killed her.” His voice was numb. Apathetic.

“No.” Garnet shook her head. “Childbirth. We knew you — didn’t know — because you didn’t show up to her wedding and we thought well, maybe, that’s just your way... but then, when you didn’t show up to her funeral, that’s when Steiner thought you must have died somewhere...”

“*Childbirth.*”

He hadn’t realized that he’d spat the word aloud until the little queen answered him. “Her first. Something went wrong — she... bled to death. I tried to save her, but...”

Freya died in a bed, Amarant thought. She died knowing for hours and hours and hours she was slowly wasting away and so that this girl can tell me very gently that she is gone.

“The child lived, though,” Garnet managed, and faltered when Amarant gave her a look of supreme disgust, that Freya’s tiny killer should live when she did not. “She lives a — normal life — with her father.”

Her father. Only one man would be her father. “Why are you telling me this?”

She stood with certain difficulty, moving over by his chair to pat his arm. Amarant flinched away, but she continued on unperturbed. “We all knew how close you and she were.”

“Not *close*,” he muttered, “just...”

“I know, Amarant,” she said gently and he turned his face away because she *didn’t*.

“Where’s she buried?”

“In the royal graveyard. I’m sure that Puck would let you go and see it, if you wanted.”

“Don’t want to go see it.”

“But you’ll go see it anyway?”

He only grunted, standing, brushing himself off. Amarant never liked talking in-depth to Garnet all that much; she had a subtle way of getting inside his brain and was far too clever for her own good. Zidane hadn’t married dumb. “... suppose.”

“She would like that.”

No, she wouldn’t. In fact, if she was in my bloody shoes ten gil says she would’ve been happy to piss on my grave.

“G’bye, Dagger.” He moved past and, because he hated kids, ruffled Cornelia’s hair. “Bye, sprog. Tell Zidane two kids ain’t a bad score.”

And he left, and Garnet quietly watched him go and wondered what she had done.

chapter one — the normal life
(I wish I could remember my name)

Iron-Tail Fratley began his day the same way he began all his days.

He woke up at daybreak, to birds singing; he washed his bleary face at the washstand. The water was ice cold, except for in winter, when it was just ice.

He pulled on his breeches; he buttoned up his crisp, fresh-ironed linen shirt from the batch of washing that had been done the night before. Whether he had known how to wash and iron or not before his mind was blown to smithereens by — he could not remember — was irrelevant; now he could starch and wring with the best of them, and often

horrified housewives by eagerly asking them what they used in their washing-water to get mud out of clothes.

The Dragoon had, at first, had no idea how to do his own washing and dirty clothes had piled up about him and he never had the correct amount of buttons on his shirts before he decided that it would simply not do. Then, with the same amount of bloody-mindedness that had steeled him into the fighting machine that would challenge rose-general Beatrix, he taught himself darning. His clothes went around resembling Tantalus' Blank for a good long while, but he had eventually got the hang of it.

He combed his fawn-coloured hair, which had turned completely grey at the temples prematurely. When all his buttons were done up and the cords pulled tight and he was neat and tidy, Fratley went downstairs to make breakfast.

His cooking had improved as much as his laundering. It had, hopelessly, taken him six years to learn how to boil an egg. Three years onward, they still were of disappointing texture; the outside of the yolk was runny and the inside too hard, or else he would hardboil the entire thing into oblivion and end up with greenish yolks. Porridge, at least, he could

do; he would set up a big pot of it simmering on his oven, along with some ever-optimistic eggs in a pan of bubbling water, and coffee. He needed his coffee. He hadn't drank tea for ten years.

King Puck had always tried to get his most treasured dragonknight general a maid, or a wife, or a wife who could double as a maid as Nature intended. Fratley always refused. He was getting along just fine. Except for the hardest part of his morning, which he always needed his cup of coffee for.

"Wake up, Gudrun," he said cheerfully, marching into his daughter's room and pulling open the curtains. "It's a beautiful day today."

His daughter, who was inevitably a hidden lump underneath the blankets at her father's usual declaration of a beautiful day, would pretend that she was asleep to the point of catatonia and might never arise again. Her father would putter out of the room, leaving her with the rising hope that his tender heart had decided she was far too sleepy to face the day and would leave her alone for at least six more hours. Alas, he always came back after exactly three minutes.

“Breakfast is ready,” her father said gently, turning down the covers over the excessively tousled hair on her head. “Come down before it gets cold.”

Gudrun Crescent knew the way her father’s mind worked. *Hurry, hurry*, he was saying mentally. *I want to see if my yolks are any good this time.*

In her mind, he should have been turned out of the Dragon Knight caste on account of being a sissy with too much emphasis on the nutritive value of Alexandrian spinach. She hadn’t seen him even wield his ceremonial pike in months; he was using it to hang washing on when he thought she wasn’t looking.

“M’c’min.”

The Burmecian girl would roll out of bed, landing with an un-sylphlike bump on the floor that rattled the windowsill. Her heavy, clumsy feet dragged on the rug-covered floorboards.

“Do you need help coming downstairs?” Her father’s voice, gentle, drifted up to her.

No, Gudrun did not need help coming downstairs. Her heavy, deformed legs were stiff but not sore; they were elephantine, huge and hideous and swollen, making her look as if she was a moogle

on big fat stilts. An ugly moogle, that ate other moogles.

She clumped downstairs to the breakfast table, flinging herself into the specially reinforced chair that Fratley had made after she had hit a growth spurt last year and splintered every chair that she flung herself down on, or even tried to sit in demurely.

Gudrun was what her father defensively called *heavyboned*. Gudrun was what the rest of Burmecia called *hideously crippled*, which was inarguable.

“Cream and treacle, just the way you like it.” Fratley set a bowl down in front of her, which she immediately stuck her fingers in to lick the treacle off them. “I’ll open your egg for you, shall I?”

“Hnggf.”

Unconcerned by his daughter’s ungrateful monosyllables, her father cut off the top of the boiled egg and sighed at the contents. Unable to decide whether to be runny or solid, the egg wibbled at him in runny-solid indecision. At least his Gunny could dip her toast soldiers in it, if the porridge lasted long enough for him to put toast soldiers in front of her.

“I’ll just cut up your toast.”

Gudrun, face securely in her porridge as she ate with a too-fragile spoon, wondered if her father would be happy if she was secured to her chair by straps with a bib across her chest. He didn’t notice her look of withering despair, her face almost-hidden by her unbrushed hair; he was too busy on his third cup of coffee, fortifying himself for his next statement.

“I’ve talked to Captain Edda,” he said tentatively, and knew he had done it all wrong; the false cheeriness in his voice made his heart sink and her mouth pause at the last vestiges of treacly oats. “She says she’s ready to take you back into training any time you like.”

Gudrun set the bowl down, breaking into sentences. “I don’t want to go back into those classes.”

“But —”

“They put me in the *baby classes* with the *baby dragoons* who *wet themselves*.”

“Gudrun.” Her father took a seat next to her, looking distressed. “Gudrun, they’re not baby classes. You have to understand, my daughter, that

you're not *ready* for the classes your age groups usually take — we've seen that — and you need to take things at a slower pace.”

They were both slowly dying under the weight of the euphemisms. Fratley knew keenly that were she the child of any other man and woman, Gudrun would not have even been allowed to hold a pike, much less participate in the training of the Burmecian children to become the next generation of soldiers and dragoon-hopefuls. Things would have been fine, if only she did not know just as keenly, if only she had been born normally, if only she was not a bundle of nervous energy — if only she weren't a *Crescent*.

He could not educate her, either, as much as he'd tried; he could not teach her, his own facts bubbling up in his brain from a recess in his mind he could not access when he consciously attempted to. Nobody else would teach her, because her personality was as pretty as she, because it was only a few years ago that he had convinced other people that his nine-year-old was actually fully sentient.

“Don't either,” she snapped. “Better than all of 'em. Can take all of them in a fight.”

That's because you drop them over your shoulder and, when you were younger, you used to sit on them until they squealed for help. "Please, my love. Please compromise."

She ate her egg, rebelliously ignoring the toast soldiers her naff father had cut up. Gudrun hated compromises, because they inevitably were horrible, because she had to take them as there was no bargaining chip in her court. "Well, *what?*"

"We will put you into a week or so's worth of classes with Edda," Fratley said decidedly. "And, after that, we will see about moving you higher."

Gudrun finally chewed on a toast soldier. If she did not take the compromise, she would be sitting inside doing nothing, reading a storybook and stuck inside the house as her father went off for long periods being with King Puck. No fighting, no even pretense-fighting with little-limbed six-year-olds who spent more time poking each other with their blunt practice spears. Her father would mother-hen over it all, sitting on the sidelines and watching, ears oblivious to the population of Burmecia and their rechristening of his daughter from Gudrun to Isn't It A Shame.

“Aah, there’s the Fratley child — isn’t it a shame.”

“You’d think that with two young lovelies like they were, they would have produced something different, wouldn’t you? Not... oh, isn’t it a shame.”

“It was a tragedy. Isn’t it a shame.”

The six-year-olds merely called her Ole Hidjus, which was much nicer in comparison. Ole Hidjus sounded like something that lived in the woods and lured children away to eat them, which she could sympathize with.

“Hnng,” she grunted, which her father could translate. *Yes, under duress.*

“There’s my good girl.” He looked so pleased and relieved she could have wrenched his head from his shoulders. “You just finish up your breakfast; I’ll need to go and see his Majesty, but I’ll be back by ten. You can go and have your morning bath, if you promise to be very safe and don’t burn yourself on the hot water.”

Gudrun was interrupted from saying something barbed and acidic by the door being knocked at. Immediately, she slithered under the table and hid

there, a trait her father hadn't been able to break her out of.

"Who could it be at this time of morning?" Fratley asked absentmindedly. "Oh, Gudrun, you don't have to hide."

"Want my helmet!"

Gudrun clung to the (thankfully sturdy) table leg, even as her father trotted off to the door; she heard it open, heard her father's polite greeting die on his lips as a deep, growly, guttural voice interrupted his own.

"Fratley."

Witnesses would later say that Iron-Tail Fratley disappeared into his house.

Witnesses would also comment that, then, Fratley appeared with his wicked, slightly dusty, seven-foot pike. Gudrun saw him get it, still under the table, peeking out underneath the tablecloth; he dropped the washing surrepticiously hanging on it on the floor, and marched out again.

Witnesses would be shocked when the gentle and mild-mannered hero of the realm took his weapon

and stabbed his visitor deeply in the belly, apparently by way of good morning.

“Should’ve known you were going to do that,” Amarant Coral said unsteadily, and keeled over.

2. life interrupted

chapter two - life interrupted (in which Our Hero arrives home)

Amarant Coral came to consciousness with a burning pain in his stomach, in a white feather bed with a hideous behatted urchin perched on the end of it staring at him. It was raining outside and the room was cold.

This is never a nice way to wake up.

He tried to sit up; the burning pain doubled, and with a grunt of expelled air he fell back on the pillows, breathing heavily. Murderous bastards, Burmecians, all of 'em. Fratley was gentle as a lamb? Yeah, Freya had got that one right. It felt like the pikehead had investigated around his guts and pulled large slithery ropes of them out with it. His side was heavily bandaged, white linen stark contrast to his mottled greenblue skin; his shirt had been removed, and the cold wet air was raising goosebumps on him.

Fuck it. He peeled down the blankets as the masked creature goggled, investigating the bandages in better light. Shit, Fratley *had* stuck him, well and good. At this rate they'd have to stick food up his ass just to get him nutrition.

His bleary eyes focused on the perching gremlin. It took ten years' fuzzy memory to pinpoint the familiarity; obscuring its entire head was Freya Crescent's crimson dragon-helmet, still looking like the beheaded skull of a red dragon, all leather and steel and age. If a wave of — pain — passed over him, he dismissed it as nausea.

Goddamn Fratley. What kind of man stuck another man in the *stomach*? A man ate with his stomach. Better to get him somewhere that didn't matter, like his pancreas or his shoulders or his heart.

"Don't touch those bandages," the Burmecian in question said briskly, coming into the room just as Amarant *had* started to touch them. "You'll start the bleeding again. Gudrun, my love, are you bothering Mr. Coral?"

"Yes."

“That’s good,” Fratley beamed, ignoring his daughter blissfully. (Or possibly not.) “Close the windows, please, our guest must be chilled.”

“*Guest?*” The redheaded monk stared at his host in complete disbelief as the horrible little creature wriggled off his bed, thumping over unwillingly to close out the cold. Any awkwardness that might have existed between the two men was merrily iced over with a thick dose of righteous anger. “Did you fuckin’ lose your memory again? You shoved a goddamn great *lance* in me, you be-tailed bastard!”

“No swearing in front of my daughter, please,” the fawn-haired Dragon Knight said primly. “And I do not apologize most sincerely.”

Amarant tried to wrap his head around that, and failed.

“You *will* live, however,” Fratley said brightly, as if this was obviously a Good Thing. “You should be up on your feet in about a week or so.”

“And then?”

“And then I finish the job. Ahahaha,” the Burmecian said, without any trace of humour or laughter whatsoever. “No, no, just my little joke. I must request you lay low as a guest in my house for

treatment, and then you will be free to do as you please.”

“Freya would’ve —”

“— wanted me to,” Fratley cut in smoothly, before any opposite claims could be made.

Both men had a little narrow-eyed stare at each other. It made the Dragon Knight’s rising hackles and Amarant’s testosterone level feel vaguely better, like a placebo.

“Side hurts,” the monk sulked after a while, shifting restlessly in his bed. Fucking hells, they might’ve gotten in a white mage so that his nice inner bits didn’t leak out messily on the rain-soaked streets, but Fratley hadn’t been generous with the painkillers.

“I shall send for the healer again posthaste,” his host said with the kind of contentment that meant that analgesiacs *might* come tomorrow. “Come on, Gunny. Let’s get you a nice hot bath and go and see Captain Edda.”

Gudrun swished her tail at Amarant rudely as she galumped after her father. He gave both of their rapidly disappearing figures the finger.

It was raining still. Big surprise.

Amarant hated the rain. In the past few years of his life, he had sweated his skin in desert cities with walls baked to the bone and devoid of moisture. His skin had dappled and leathered darker underneath those burning suns, and when it had rained it had been the kind of torrential downpour that tore your skin away from your bones. The rain in Burmecia — like now — was gentle and drizzly and depressing, as if it didn't quite know whether it was supposed to be there or not and was unsure if it actually had a date somewhere else.

The City of Rain, and him in Iron-Tail Fratley's house. Freya's house. How was that for a fucking lark? Freya's house, Fratley's house. Maybe this room was Fratley's room; maybe Freya had slept here —

Amarant lurched, heaved himself an inch to the side of the bed before giving a tooth-gritted grunt of agony as he fell back. His skin shivered and itched as if bits of Freya Crescent had been strewn in the blankets, and he felt unutterably stupid.

There were no bits of Freya Crescent here. She was somewhere out there in that rainy kirkyard, long buried down deep in that soft earth and green grass. He wondered what she would have thought about that; she'd hated being shut up, inside a box inside a room inside a house inside a city, more than content to roam for ever with no mention or suggestion of walls. She would have shit herself being shut in a coffin, excepting if she was dead.

Because she was.

Well, *fuck*.

It felt most abominably like waking up from a long and uneasy dream. Reconciling the Freya in his head and the bits of Freya rotting away in a box came together in Amarant's head like oil and water, like his digestion and Eiko's cooking. He'd had sunstroke, once; half-fried his brains in his skull, simmering like a stew, and the delirium he'd felt coming through that fever felt a little bit like this.

Felt vivid enough. He could smell the rain and the cotton curtains. Shit, Burmecia was a *hole*, the armpit at the end of the world, soddenly godforsaken, the kind of place an animal crawled to die —

Death again. Amarant's mind hurriedly slithered away from the concept before it could slyly pounce on his thoughts and beat them up for money. Instead he concentrated on how ill he felt and how hungry he was. Nausea battled with the rumble in his abdomen until he scrabbled for the white basin considerately placed beside his bed; what came up out of his guts was blood-flecked and hurt like almighty hell. The most dangerous part about having your lower bits punctured was your insides getting rot; back in civilization, where there was sterilization and healers, all you had to worry about was feeling like you'd spent the night in an alleyway with a cheap trick called Jym who'd tried making love to your bellybutton.

Well, now the nausea was gone, but he felt so weak that a Mu could have killed him gently with a feather pillow. Amarant collapsed, more than mildly helpless, back into the bed. He wanted a drink and he wanted thirty extra degrees of temperature and he wanted to have never taken the sea-tossed journey home to the Mist continent. His mind thus left defenseless in the face of growing self-pity, was cornered once more by the Concept, hurrying up sneakily from the side so that he couldn't run away.

Death.

Freya.

It hadn't gelled when Dagger had told him and it wasn't gelling now, back in her homeland. Freyadead, Freya Passed Away. Freya plus death, meaning Freya Crescent was dead. Freya, *Freija-gobri*, Freya ya-ya sleeps-in-in-the-mornings with her silver hair sticking up like a wintry haystack. Freya who'd destroyed Death with him standing at rank, hulking body shooting forward in the wake of her leap. Freya of the bony ankles, Freya of the bony wrists, Freya whom he had approved of the moment she gave him the finger and challenged him with the warrior's way of walking down at the Alexandria docklands. He'd only *liked* her far, far later, but a long-limbed rat with the wild-eyed promise of violence and a big spear had been something Amarant Coral could find real and true.

Freya the reason he'd left, Freya the reason he'd returned.

She'd probably done it just to spite him.

"Well," he addressed the window unsteadily, "see if I fuckin' care," and was promptly sick again. His mind kept pouncing, notwithstanding, pulling at the gash over and over and hardly giving him time to breathe or vomit or close his eyes.

Freya. **Freya.** *Freija-go-bri* —

“... The *baby* dragoons *smelled*.” (The obvious insinuation was urine.) “They were idiot stupids.”

Afternoon in Burmecia, light rain with hope of less cloud. Fratley, altogether too happy that a rather longsuffering Edda had not changed her mind despite logic and had agreed to take in Gudrun for threequarters of her nursery classes (“But please, my lord Sir Fratley, don’t get your hopes up — I don’t know if she’s going to *get* anything out of these” — translation: she bites on her good days) was busily making afternoon tea of bread-and-dripping, with extra dripping on account of his daughter being a *very* good girl who had only snarled once — well, twice — and even nodded mulishly to yes-or-no questions.

“I thought they were very sweet.” They *had* been very sweet, bright-eyed little things with their wooden spears shrieking with giggles at the end of a lesson and doing their best to demolish a straw dummy all together, bounding around as if they had springs in their feet. His daughter had obviously not found the scene charming; for all of her bluster,

every moment she looked as if she wanted to sink deeper and deeper into her helmet like a pudding. “Milk or fruitwater?”

“’ter.” She was under the table again; the reason being the healer was upstairs, tending to their visitor, hopefully involving a lot of stinging poultices and tinctures. Fratley had never felt so refreshingly uncharitable in his life. There were her footsteps now; he smiled as the other Burmecian came in down the stairs, doctor’s kit slung over her shoulder, looking as put-out as he felt content.

“And how is our patient, Gretchen?”

She merely gave him a bleak look, resettling her glasses on the end of her muzzle before she shuddered descriptively and headed towards the door. “Call me again if he worsens and don’t let him move. Good day, my Lord.”

“Ah, well,” Fratley said vaguely to himself, as Gunny slowly deigned to crawl out from underneath the table and the fat spat on the griddle. He piled two pieces of steaming fried bread on a plate, judiciously simmering with fat, one hand groping for the dripping. “He’s not dead yet.”

“Who s’he?”

Gudrun had been absolutely frenzied with excitement ever since it had happened, and that plaintive question had been on her lips for hours. He would have been pleased to see her take so much interest in anything, had it been anything but *this*. He had given her the answer a dozen times, not satisfying her by saying anything different, still snorting over the pertinent parts. “Amarant Coral. A... family... *friend*. Eat your dripping, my love.”

Her mouth was busied with bread only for a few seconds before she managed to chew herself into coherency. “Why’d you stab him?”

“I, er...”

“Do it again.”

“*Gudrun*.” The tone was forbidding, though Gods help him at that he had to quell a smile. “This topic is *not* for the dinner table.”

“... hnng.” They weren’t at the dinner table, anyway. They were at the *afternoon tea* table. It became a dinner table at seven o’clock and a supper table at nine-fifteen. Gudrun tilted her helmet for maximum food intake, determined to get afternoon tea done with as quickly as possible so that she could go back to the game of asking. This was the

most entertaining thing that had ever happened, *ever*.

Fratley saw through her ruse. “Chew everything twenty-five times or you’ll choke. I’m going to take Mr. Coral up his food.”

His nine-year-old swished her legs back and forth, swallowing thoughtfully, crimson leather bobbing up and down and the chair creaking ominously with the movement. She was going through another one of her slow growth spurts. He really needed to make her another chair. “Poison?”

“Little mouths at the table are for *chewing*, Gudrun!”

Gruel in a bowl; mild guilt stabbed at him, his own feelings’ momentary treachery, and he was about to add more milk to it before he remembered that he was feeding *Amarant Coral* and took it up plain on a tray. Fratley held it before him like a shield, mounting the stairs soft and dry, rapping on the door smartly before opening it. Amarant was sitting up in bed with his red rough locks of hair spilled all over the bedhead, legs too long for the bed itself; his toes stuck out of the blankets.

“I want to fuckin’ leave,” he announced grimly.

“I’m sure you do. Here, eat up your gruel.” Fratley would have cheerfully rammed it down his throat, bowl and all. His houseguest looked as if he had done just that when faced with it, tray on his lap, but extreme hunger won out and he lifted the bowl to his lips.

“Tastes like swampwater.” Amarant wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, double over his short beard, looking up to see Fratley’s retreating back and swishing tail as he made his way back down the stairs. “Hey, where’re *you* goin’?”

He paused mid-step. There was a bright red ribbon on his tail, neat and dapper, that reminded Amarant of something he could not quite recall. “Back down to tea with my daughter, if you please, *uninterrupted* as you think whatever thoughts you care to.”

The way he said it, *daughter*, made Amarant’s knuckles turn to lava. “Daughter, eh?” He slurped at the mess again, the grumble of his voice harsh and glassy and filled with sneer. (The way he said it, *daughter*, made Fratley’s spine turn to ice.) “She’s the crippled mongol-mouse, huh, just like Dagger said. No wonder Freya carked it when that — *thing* burst out her hips. Must’ve been your side of the

family, *Frats*, somebody inbred back there? Looks like one of your grandsires fucked a Garuda, I'd've drowned it, first thi —"

The bowl of gruel clattered to the floor, mercifully unbroken but certainly spilt, as Fratley leapt forward with an intake of breath and leapt nimbly to the bed. One of his deceptively light, arched feet pressed down on Amarant's bandaged midsection; before Amarant could move away, Fratley had pressed his foot down, lightning-quick. The Burmecian was perhaps out of practice, but so was Amarant, and the pressure made him snarl in pain.

"Here are a few rules," Fratley murmured, through clenched teeth. His dark eyes burned absolute fire. 'You do not slander the name of my *wife* in my house.' The foot added pressure. "You do not slander the name of my *daughter* in my house. You do not *look* at her the wrong way or I will kill you where you slouch, am I speaking with clarity?"

"I," said Amarant through equally clenched teeth, "'m gonna rip your fuckin' dick off."

"With your wound? Do try, Mr. Coral." All the hate and the misery and the venom had been put in his tongue, his mouth, spewing out like bile as the

demons on his shoulders danced the fling. ‘Leave all you like; your stomach will ensure infection before you make it through the Grotto, and the dragons are being particularly pesky of late, I hear. Call the Queen to assist you out of here by Moogle post. It *will* take a few days, and I cook *all* your food.’ Fratley’s smile bared nasty little teeth. “Do not underestimate my desire to see you die a slow, painful death.”

One of Amarant’s large, quick-killing hands with all those powerful fingers closed around his calf; he was a Burmecian, and he knew that the greenblue-skinned man could snap his bones like twigs. Fratley leant his weight further on the bandages; the grip wavered, and from the ensuing expression he thought that Amarant might be violently sick.

“If I ripped your leg off,” Amarant said slowly, “Crescent would kill me.”

“If I laced your food with ladybug spores,” Fratley said evenly, “my wife would hate me.”

The pressure lightened almost imperceptibly; the grip lessened just barely.

“It’s the only reason I haven’t —”

“— or I would’ve pulled the pike out’n shoved it through your eye first thing...”

“And ripped your wound open with my hands and pulled your innards out.”

Another pause.

“In a fair fight, with a good wind, I might kill you.”

“Try, Iron-brain,” Amarant grunted. “Fighting fair is for pussies and big girl’s blouses.”

Fratley removed himself from standing on the bed and dusted himself off, wiping the gruel up with a napkin, the loathing in his voice all painted over with the peeling sunny cheer from before. “What a mess. I’ll get you some more in a moment, there’s lots. Excuse me, Mr. Coral, I must go and check on my daughter.”

(The hate between them frothed like the sea, like the pull of the tides in and out, something steeped in horror that beat its wings against both of them and raised the short soft fuzz on the back of Fratley’s neck rise and the muscles in Amarant’s jaw ache. Horror; fear; jealousy; the slow-banked smouldering fire had been drawn to the top as if by poultice, and lived within them both. It lived deep within Fratley’s

stomach; it nested in Amarant's hands. The urge to tear the other into millions and millions of pieces was undeniable and heady and poisonous, now, *now*, for being him, for being him, for not being him, for being there, for not being there, for the hate hate hate that tore at the soft flesh of their eyes and their brains and then —)

As Fratley walked down the stairs he had to stop and lean against the wooden railing. For some odd reason he suddenly felt like weeping; it passed and he started again, back down to his daughter who had slithered down in her seat until her chin was at the table and her calves rested squarely on the floor. The helmet scraped against the wood like the beak of a crimson bird.

“Oh, Gudrun.” Suddenly choked, he settled the bowl down on the sideboard, won over by rage and grief and possession. Fratley threw his arms around her shoulders, tugging her to sit upright, half-burying himself in her rain-and-grit smelling shoulder. He adored her, slithers and all, even the way she licked things off bread and refused to eat the actual vehicle most times and sat on things smaller than her and never brushed her hair. She would never be normal, she would always be his. “I love you, my Gunny. I do.”

His nine-year-old squirmed unmercifully in his grip but eventually consented to be held, obviously with the hypothesis that her father was having one of his usual fits of insanity and might go away if not provoked. “*Mmmnnffg.*”

“I do,” he repeated, and for a moment wished as hard as he could that Amarant Coral had never come to his house.

Gudrun, seeing possible use to be gained from this, relaxed slightly in her father’s inutterably embarrassing hug. “Who’s the strangeman, Da?”

He let go of her, picking her helmet up and ruffling her wealth of hair, dropping it again on her head before she could protest as he bustled back to the kitchen with a smile. It was difficult to choke things down again, after so many years, after so long; after he had opened his eyes Amarant had remained, and thus it must be so. His voice was ruthlessly and kindly dismissive, in a way it never was. “He’s just an ass, my pet. He’s an — idiot stupid.”

Gudrun was so shocked she ate her fried bread, even the crusts.

3. the runaway

chapter three - the runaway (prologue #2)

So let us start from the beginning.

Ten Years Ago

“I’ll go.”

The court of Burmecia, if it could be called a court, consisted of the royal throne discreetly piled with cushions for the diminutive King who looked as if he would much rather be outside running riot with the other children. Fratley was wont to stand by his side, ramrod-straight, pike in his hand; he tended to startle forward whenever Puck said anything that vaguely sounded like command, bred in the bones of his early mental illness that he ought to do whatever his Majesty told him. Freya would pace as the tiny group of ministers — all elders, whom Puck had appointed, and Kai — talked. The stone throneroom

was enormous for them, but her long stride still felt too large for the confinement.

“Freya!” Startled out of standing attention, Fratley leant on his weapon, those fawn-coloured eyes trained upon her in surprise as the other councillors idly turned to look. “You can’t, Freya. You’re needed here.”

“In the summer? For *what*, precisely?” There was more than needed bite to her words.

“My dear,” he said, slightly feebly — oh, how much she *hated* that ‘my dear’, no amount of rough or gentle ‘no’ would make him drop it — “We need your help now more than ever. More refugees are coming in every day. The political situation needs Lady Dragoon Freya Crescent. We can just hire mercenaries to thin out the hill dragons.”

“From our already dwindling coffers? Don’t be silly; we haven’t the money!”

There was a murmur among the ministers. Jarl among them nodded, turning a rheumy eye towards Puck and Fratley, tapping his cane next to the padded bench the ministers sat upon as he tended to do when making a point. “Lady Freya is right, your

Majesty. We need everything our treasury can give us, despite Alexandria's war reparations."

Poor Garnet's war reparations, when Alexandria needed the money itself. It seemed like every city had something to rebuild, but Burmecia most of all. Houses needed stone, the roads needed redoing, the fields replanting. Freya's suggestion had been a quarter in weak jest; of course she would not be allowed to go, but somebody had to do something. Burmecia lost money in these early days like the clouds overhead lost rain; quick and constant.

"Which includes," Jarl added, warming obviously to the subject, "the Eastern grain farms; we lose more livestock every day to the coarse lizards slithering out from the mountains, and the settlers are up in arms. The quicker something is done about it, the sooner we —"

"Yeah, yeah." Puck was already bored with the topic. "Tell'ya what, *I'll* go, it'll be awesome. Lord Fratley, pack us some sandwiches!"

Freya ground her cuspids and thought very hard about her mantra of inner tranquility. *I will not turn him over my knee and give him a hiding. I will not turn him over my knee and give him a hiding.*

“Your *majesty*,” Fratley said reproachfully. (Nobody did reproach like Fratley.) “That ill becomes you, Puck. You know you need to stay here to govern the kingdom. I will go with Lady Freya.”

“Fratley, no.” The Burmecian female dragoon attempted to not give in to the urge to rub her temples. “You’re far better as advisor in politics to Puck than I am, one of us needs to stay here to be his protector — and besiding, if the Court forgives my selfishnesses, if I were to go I am in better condition and would appreciate the exercise.”

Appreciate the exercise. For the last year of her life, Freya had been wandering around with Zidane, walking herself to whipcords with bare minimum food and practically every day spent fighting for her life. Of course she was in better condition. Sitting around Burmecia had her near tears; her temper was testament to that. She was constantly on edge, snappish like a shrew, angry at everybody and everything. *Let me out of here before I go **mad**, more like.*

“Awwwh, *okay*.” Puck swung his legs, looking sulky, ridiculous helmet that he refused to take off save for state occasions sinking over his eyes. ‘Freya can go. You may go,’ he added graciously and

unnecessarily, but at least he was getting into the royalty thing. Freya pricked her ears; she hadn't exactly expected to be let off to do the actual thing. "Go off, spend a couple weeks in the mountains, bring me back some heads. Spend a month or whatever, bring me back ten heads. Right, next *boring* thing? Is it lunch yet?"

And she was free.

Just like that.

The courtyard outside the throne-room was summery, wet from the last sunshower, everything warm and damp and slightly rolling in hot mist as the sun burnt the moisture from the bricks. The season after spring in Burmecia was a thunderstormy, hot one, with everybody walking through a constant haze of condensation. The bells were ringing for midday; Freya felt a great weight lift from her shoulders, like shrugging off a pack after months of walking, like being let out of prison to walk as a freedman.

She was never meant for politics. She was useless at them. She could offer nothing of worth; trade negotiations with Treno bored her, contracts with Lindblum put her to sleep. There were plenty of other Burmecians who had stepped to the fore with

intelligence and wisdom both in these matters; Freya Crescent was simply a soldier in peacetime, hands not quite free of blood and not used to the feel of an unused weapon in her grip in the days of rebuilding from destruction.

Freya loved her country; she worshipped her country. However, her return to the cradle had been after four extraordinary long and eventful years of travel and some other kingdom's soil underneath her wandering feet, and being penned in like a canary with nothing useful to do made her hands *itch*. There was no meaningful toil for her — oh, such wretched self-pity, but it was *true* — no houses she was allowed to build, no mortar she was allowed to place. What use was a dragoon of *her* ilk these days? The only joy she got was meeting with Garnet and Zidane again, at state affairs, reliving her glory days over a glass of Alexandrian champagne and wishing it was ale and panicking that she was becoming a crooked old man talking about old exploits at the age of twenty-two.

Was she only twenty-two? She felt so very, very old.

So what could she do? She could sit inside the house, reining in her tongue with a short check with

a man she did not know who deserved better than her lips' sharper edge for a fit of temper he did not cause. She could offer advice to an infant king who would rather be playing hide-and-seek. She could talk to ministers about finance, and, and agriculture, and infrastructure, and —

Or she could go and kill dragons. Now *that* was something like.

The dragon knight threw her head back and actually *laughed*, which felt good, which felt like springs and apples and sunshine and wildflowers. She was being sent away! It would be — not quite *vacation*, because mountain dragons were fierce and powerful and dangerous and would rip her leg off, but she was going to have her leg ripped off *alone* wandering in the hills she had been wandering for years now and it would soothe her mind like a long, hot soak in a bath.

“You seem — happy.”

She whirled around to Fratley, who had the queerest expression on her face, half-forlorn and half-wistful. “I haven’t seen you this happy in a while, Freya.”

What could she say to that? She took off her helmet, trying to feel the slightest bit of shame, shaking silver hair out in the muggy air around them as he drew closer. “I feel — useful.”

“You’re never not useful.” That soft, warm voice, like crushed diamonds, like honey. She had loved that voice. “Puck — well, Puck needs you like anything; the people need you. *I* need you. Reconsider, Freya, do. I don’t know what I’d do without you for a month, up in those godforsaken mountains.”

The fact that you do not know what you would do with yourself were I gone four weeks is by far the best reason to go already. “Perhaps you’ll take up a musical instrument.”

“Frey, be *serious* —”

“I’m tired of being serious,” she snapped. “I’m tired of seriousness and courts and your o’erweening *duty*, when frankly *my* duty lies in the hills helping farmers stop dragons snatching up their cattle.”

He was hurt and she regretted it, as his eyes immediately retreated somewhere in his head, slightly wounded. Fratley was easier to harm than a puppy; one lift of the leg to kick and he shrieked in

preemptive pain. “I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I spoke out of turn.”

“No, no.” Her would-be lover sounded as subdued as she did. “I think — it will probably be good for you. It’s just so *dangerous*, Freya, I worry and —”

“About *me*? Fratley, really —”

“— and I miss you and —”

“You can take your meals every night with Puck, Fratley, he’d like that.”

There was a rueful light in his eyes that generally always had the ability to make her smile despite herself; when Fratley relaxed his laces he was an innately attractive man, if only the relaxation would last more than ten seconds and if his brain cells could hold together from only slowly healing mental trauma. Sometimes he stood in a room and did not know where he was, and those moments made her weep. “His Majesty in lieu of your conversation is, you might understand, cold comfort.”

She grinned at him. The rain was starting again, pattering into her hair, light and warm as tea. “You’ll get used to it.”

If only he wouldn't respond like a hurt dog to his master's hand so, both cringing and grasping towards any gesture of affection. "I wish you wouldn't go, Freya."

"If wishes were chocobos then beggars would ride, as the saying goes."

Why did he have to remind her every ten minutes that she did not love him? She had found it within her to *like* this man, despite the clingy neediness, despite all his problems, despite her own — and that had been hard enough. Every little second more nowadays she had to escape from her own bitterness when he exacerbated it, so that he did not suffer the consequences. *Don't, Fratley. I can only just bear not loving you. I can't bear hating you.*

And then his hand was at her cheek, claws like momentary gentle pins on her skin, from his touch rather than the sharpness. She could not help but avoid his gaze, the intensity of it, staring at the wet hot flagstones again and breathing in the freesias and the rain. "You're like a wild thing sometimes, Freya. Sometimes I think I could —"

"Don't," she breathed, because it ripped at her. "Don't."

The uneasy dance of his hand cupping her cheek ended and he dropped his hand, still close, her eyes tightly wedged shut so hard red things bounced off the lids. There was an undefinable noise from him, deep in his throat — and then he was gone again, off to find Puck, out of her personal space.

She counted to ten and opened them up again. Gone, like he had never been there. Freya leant heavily against a wrought-iron rose arbour and stared up at the sky.

I have inevitably turned into someone I heartily dislike.

And then *somehow* it got out all over the rag-and-bone city that she was going, and she could hardly pack for the knocking of condolences that she would be parted with Sir Fratley for a whole month. (“No, of course I shan’t cope,” she longed to say. “I had forgotten that I went catatonic and didn’t stir for the *three years* we were separated the last time, and by the way, he sleeps in the guest bedroom.”) Young women brought casseroles and promised dinner, still with the hope that their cooking would force him

from Freya's increasingly ungrateful side and into their waiting arms.

The city was beginning to choke her. It was not like Lindblum or Alexandria of old, where she could melt into the crowd — and, generally, into a bar — the nobody dragoon of Burmecia, the fighter of an increasingly waning age, her uniform a rare sight to be seen on something other than an old man back in her homeland. Something for a mother to point out to her child and be forgotten almost immediately.

Here everybody knew her name, her business and *exactly* her appointments, calling her Lady and doing curtseys as she went. Rebuilding Burmecia with her bare hands — as long as she had been allowed — had been the satisfactory thing, just about enjoyable; being new gentry made her want to run away and hide. Freya Crescent, one of the Nine who walked with Zidane Death-Killer and saved Gaia? Bahamut's bones, she was a lonely ex-drunkard and the granddaughter of a blacksmith, no royal blood or hero to be adored. She would always be proud of what she and Zidane and the rest had accomplished — they had gone so very far, and done so many things — but once more she found herself upon the first square of her chessboard, no more satisfied than she had been at eighteen.

Why was she restless? She had much to be grateful for, and —

she was going to take up drink again if she was forced inside for another meeting on the state of the kingdom with a child-king who couldn't be bothered to learn to spell *economics*, losing all dignity, patience and honour in the face of being his bodyguard until he was approximately thirty.

(Forgetfulness was abhorrent. How could she forget roaming mountains, the highlands, the salt-sweet beaches?)

They'd had another almost-fight about the logical fact that she was leaving the next morning. She hated his quiet politeness more than anything; his gentleness made her impotent temper feel worse, baser than a Mu for lashing out at him. They'd gone to bed with some polite fiction of making-up; his disappointment was still everywhere, in her hair, in her clothes, in the bags she was packing. She could not meditate between these walls; it was no haven for her. She was going mad *mad mad* —

There was a distant song-peal of summer thunder. Now everything was going to turn into mud and Fratley would beg her stay another day until the roads up into the hills dried.

Bugger that.

She started packing like a madman. In went the minimum changes of clothes; the things for her possible repair of the armour, the oils and polishes for the Dragon Hair, her judicious amount of tea, her tinder and flint — nails, compass, bandages. A package of boiled-egg-and-watercress sandwiches done by somebody kind that would last her until she could get food from the farmhouses along the way. Candles. The roll-up of her groundsheet, her sleeping things, all that to balance on her back like a snail — she could sleep in a cave, and it sounded better to her ears than a holiday house, and —

The storm was getting bad now. It threw debris upon her balcony, tapping at the doors. She let them open; the night was balmy-hot and thunderous, and she was going to boil inside her coat as it was. The wind stormed in and whipped her hair and she was determined to leave even if she died of it.

(More pebbles and bits of twig, blown in by the summer storm, obviously calling her out. The wind was coming to get her. She was leaving. *She was leaving.*)

Groundsheet secured to her pack; that itself stuffed full to bursting, welcome as warm water on

her back — tunic, trousers, scarlet coat wrapped all around her like an old skin. Fingerless gloves. The helmet, oh Gods she loved that helmet. *Girt for war, Freya. Gird thy loins.* Dragon Hair, monstrously beautiful-heavy, safely in her hand. The others had donated their most precious of weapons — well, all save one — to a museum that had begged for them; immortalized forever in bright, shining cases, careful inscriptions for later children to be bored over. Not hers. She had politely declined.

She snuffed out the candle in her room with thumb and forefinger. (More pebbles. She really did feel badly for Fratley for having to clean them up.) Freya Crescent stepped out onto her balcony, shutting the doors behind her, took a deep breath, and Leapt —

(Here I am. Here I am, this is me. Goodbye, Fratley. Goodbye, Puck. Goodbye elders and citizens and young girls and the awkward guards and the bodies in the graveyard, the Cleyrans in the temples unused to the rain — goodbye, politics, policies, goodbye, goodbye. I am going to embrace the wet street with both my arms and disappear out the walls running)

landing squarely on the large, greenskinned figure who had been watching her house from the street, slamming him bodily to the ground as she teetered both clawed feet on his chest and stepped off. She stared at the red hair out on the glistening cobblestones, damp with the rivulets, green jacket and green trousers and hulking muscles that could never be Burmecian. He lay prone on the street, eyes squirmed shut.

“Oh,” she said, puzzled. “I’ve killed Amarant.”

“I,” said the prone figure, through clenched teeth, “am gonna fuckin’ kill *you*, rat.”

“It talks!” She felt absurdly happy now. “Get up, man, a broken spine isn’t anything to blubber about.”

“Do you always jump men on the street?”

“Only the handsome ones. It was dark, I had you mistaken. Get *up*, Coral, and stop your bitching.”

Amarant levered himself up from the ground with one strong arm, glowering at her from behind those half-shadowed brows, rainwater running down his face as she absolutely beamed at him with the droplets cascading off her helmet. “What the *fuck*

are you doin', Crescent? I've been standing out here pelting your goddamn window for ten minutes."

That explained the inundation of twigs and rocks. "That was *you*? You couldn't use the knocker and front door, could you, like a *normal* person? No, of course you couldn't. Well, you're just in time; let's go!"

"Go?" She felt half-sorry for him; he looked absolutely befuddled as she shouldered her pack again, checking she had everything, doing half a jig down the street as the rain pelted in the shadows and she felt glad to be *her*. "Have you gone off your rocker, rat?"

"Yes," she said exuberantly. "I'm off to kill dragons. D'you want to walk me out, Coral? You can eat the watercress sandwiches, I hate watercress. Obviously, since you were here to see me, you haven't got anything better to do — oh, just come on, I'll tell you on the way out the Gate. We'll have half the guard out here in a second."

"You *have* gone fuckin' bonkers."

"Fine, then. Stay here." She started off without him, head cocked over her shoulder, mouth spread in

the widest grin that he had ever seen on her face. “I warn you, though, Burmecian beer is *piss*.”

“I’m going to goddamn regret this,” Amarant Coral muttered to himself, before finally shambling off after the scarlet figure and into the darkness.

“I regret this.”

The thunderstorm had already stopped. The night was settled over everything like a deep warm mist; the moon lit their way in pitch blackness, and they trudged along the slightly muddy road out of the city with everything smelling clean and damp and new. The stars wavered in puddles at the roadside and the tall grass shivered in the balmy breeze.

Being with Amarant was sort of like putting your feet back into an old pair of shoes that were too small for you. Uncomfortable and obnoxious, but you knew them like the healed blisters at the backs of your feet. “What are you talking about? I gave you some of the cheese ones.”

“Let me get this straight.” He swallowed a mouthful of sandwich, giving her the withering eyeball glance which she knew meant that he

thought she was the most singularly idiotic person on Gaia. “You’re skippin’ out in the middle of the night to go and stick a bunch of mountain dragons?”

“Right.”

“And you think this is great?”

“Positively.”

Amarant grunted in deep abiding disgust. “Insanity better not be catching, rat. Walk further away.”

“I don’t think you have to be worried there, Coral.” She chewed on her crusts, merry like a child, still sighing dreamily and not quite able to believe her luck. “Gods, this is beautiful. No stupid city, no stupid court. Admittedly I could do better than your company if I trained an oglop to speak, but you’ll do.”

“Ha fuckin’ ha.” He stuck one of his hands in his pockets, moving along at a leisurely pace, still looking extraordinarily disgruntled. “I don’t know who’s stupider, you for going or me for not stickin’ in that bar in Lindblum that gave me free booze and coming to see you.”

“Why *did* you come and see me, Amarant? Do I owe you money?”

He shrugged expressively. “I was in the area. Came to see you for shits and giggles. Got the damn giggles, at least. What the hell are you smoking?”

“I say, Amarant.” An idea was rolling around in her head, and she stood on it before it could get away. “You don’t want to come along properly, do you?”

“Hmph. Me?”

“It could be amusing. I’ll buy you a drink afterwards.”

“To go and kill dragons on some godforsaken hill?”

“Eating rations, shitting in the woods, that type of thing. I’m sure you get the gist.”

“Me?”

Freya adopted the sweet and sympathetic tone of a teacher with a young student, fresh with homework they couldn’t complete. “Well, I understand if you feel you’re not *up* to it, Coral,” she said kindly. “Dragons are so very dangerous. I can’t put your life in danger. I retract the offer. You’re not

to come. Imagine if you got a *boo-boo*. A whole potion might be used. I suppose you should leave it up to the professionals —”

“You’re a godsdamned bitch.”

“And you’re a bloody bastard. Are you coming?”

(He said yes.) (He regretted it.)

4. life on hold

chapter four - life on hold (once were warriors)

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

Captain Edda nodded in benign approval at the sight that greeted her; teaching the garten-classes how to hold their blunt, nicked training spears — whittled for small claws — with giggling monotony over and over again into a stuffed dummy on a wooden prop, to build up their grip, was not the most challenging of jobs. It was blissfully relaxing, however, after rounds with exquisitely arrogant Burmecian adolescents convinced they were all budding Freya Crescents or Iron-Tail Fratleys, the elder ones who were only now beginning to grasp that they would probably never shine enough to attain the elite stages of dragoonhood — too few and too many all at the same time. She was too old and too impatient to keep on doing this; she was the only one who could.

Which meant that she really did not deserve what was happening at the end of the row.

The little students all giggled and chatted at a moderate level — she preferred a dull roar that ebbed appropriately the moment she turned her head to glance at them — with the constant clatter of spears being dropped and somebody missing their dummy entirely and falling over. Every so often now, however, the giggles would reach hysteria as there was a sickening splintering noise; tiny Sigurd, second-from-last, would sound the migraine-inducing alarm.

“CAPTAIN, GUDWUN HAS BROWNED HER
SWEAT AND IT IN PIECES ALL OVER THE
WOUND, MA’AM!”

The figure at the end, obscured in helmet with half-a-spear in one hefty hand that was about ten times the size of Sigurd’s, always glowered at what was in her hand as if hoping it would burst into flames. Edda felt a pressure headache coming on. Gudrun Crescent was already using the training spears from the upper classes; she was not going to give her one made of anything but wood lest she decide to see how far Sigurd could fly if hit with it.

“Thank you, Sigurd. *Back to your dummies.*” The titter dissolved only microscopically; their latest and most famous pupil was a source of class-wide amusement that had not yet ceased to be funny for them. “Gudrun, come and get a new spear.”

This was the third spear this session. Gudrun — who was up to Edda’s elbow already, and she *slouched* — lumbered over to the front to get a new one; it looked like a toothpick in her grasp. White-knuckled and simmering, she dragged her feet all the way back to her place.

“All right, Gudrun.” Edda stood over the deformed girl and the dummy, impatience tinting her voice like red in a particularly frustrated sunset. Fratley was an old friend; she didn’t want to hear the vaguely hurt disappointment in his voice at being told, for the umpteenth time, that his child could *not* take part in the dragoon training. It was a crying shame; the child of Iron-Tail Fratley and Freya Crescent should have been a warrior to bring Burmecia to its feet. It was Edda’s private belief that young Freya had never come back quite right from challenging Death with Prince Consort Zidane; it warped her, physically and mentally, and then there had been that business with —

Gudrun was staring at her, the shaded dragon-eyes of the helmet that hid her face somehow managing to look baleful as she waited for Edda's orders in insolent silence. The elder Burmecian's eyes travelled down the cords of her shoulders to her long ropy arms, full sleeves hiding her skin up to her discoloured hands; Fratley covered her up as much as possible, as much as both he and his daughter could fervently want, taking extraordinary pains to even make her gloves with the four fingers and thumb cut out so that as little of her could be seen. She held them low on her body, as if that would suffice to hide their shape, so completely alien to the delicate wires of Burmecian hands. The only recognizable thing were the vestigial claws on the tapered ends, which were currently dug tightly into the polish of the spear. Edda sighed pointedly.

“Hold it in both hands, Gudrun,” she snapped. She had long since discovered that talking in the favoured slow, enunciated syllables to the child was useless; she understood sharpness well enough — much too well enough — but simply didn't care to *listen*. It was like herding a sullen chicken. “That'll stop the spear from breaking. Wrap your left hand around the heft, a few fingers up — no, not that many fingers —”

Sigurd was inexpertly smothering his laughter through his claws as Gudrun unwillingly folded her other hand on the spear. Edda gave him a Look, which he chose to not notice. Now she really had a headache coming on, though Gudrun knowing her left from her right was always a good sign. “Don’t look at Sigurd — yes, yes, look at the *dummy*. Now, I want you to hit the center of the dummy as hard as you possibly can.”

Gudrun did not move.

“You can hit the dummy now, Gudrun.”

There was a low, agonized rumble from the back of her student’s throat, that sounded like a yan in pain; Sigurd collapsed entirely in the undue hilarity without reprimand, but the older girl did not even turn her head to look at him.

Edda’s tone went from drill instructor to gummy-sweet, the kind of lolly that ripped your teeth out through your gums. (It made Gudrun want to be a dog; for the hackles to rise on her back so she could *bark bark bark* and go for the throat, wild and rabid and foaming in the warm moist morning.) “We’d like to hit the dummy, wouldn’t we, dear? Just tap the end of the spear anywhere on the dummy,

Gudrun. Just do it. Let's see how that grip works. Hit the dummy with the nice spear."

There was another low rumble, but this one contained the surprising hint of words.

"What was that?"

"You won't like it," said Gudrun.

"You won't like it, *who?*" If the little wretch could make proper sentences, she was going to make with the proper formality, Fratley be damned.

"Won't like it, —" The ending comment was too slurred to be called on, though it was almost definitely "— wormface."

Edda's blood went to rolling boil. It was bad enough teaching the adolescents, and *they* had a thin veneer of whining deference. In the olden days she had been saluted to on every street corner, a path cut by swathes of soldiers, who could not speak but for the fierce and fervent *Captain Edda, ma'am!*. "In which case, you won't like sitting on the bench waiting for your father to come and pick you up, will you?"

"HWIT THE DUMMY, HIDJUS!" Sigurd cheered her on, in an either extremely unwise show

of solidarity or hoping he was on to a good thing. The other students had all stopped hitting to watch now, too, the heads of their spears trailing the grass as the wind whipped at their feet.

Gudrun looked around the courtyard with what appeared to Edda to be the slightly bemused gaze of someone lost in a strange dream, unable to see the sort of gunpowder-explosive spark in her eyes; she was as if waking from a long, boring sleep to an equally boring bedroom, staring at her teacher with practiced infuriating blankness with the training spear in her clumsy hands. From far the first time, Edda wondered what she was doing in her training group; she should be weaving baskets, or being put in a workhouse, rather than embarrassing the already-declining dragoon tradition by *being* there.

“All right, then, go and sit on the —”

The girl slammed the spear forward with almost no heave of build-up, simply the quick bunching of grossly-made muscles; Edda felt herself go flying back into the grass as the dummy and the post, spear stuck firmly through it, broke off and hit her full in the chest. She collapsed with a stunned *oof* as the air was sucked from her lungs.

There was a completely stunned silence, broken only by a little sob from one of the little garteners.

“OLE HIDJUS KILLED THE TEACHOH,” Sigurd bellowed. “OLE HIDJUS GOIN’ TO JWAIL.”

Lest she really be dead, the baby dragoons scampered over to their teacher; Edda opened her eyes to a round of panicky stares, with the hunched-over figure by the broken pole only partially visible through the crowd; it was frozen in place before it turned around and promptly loped off. The Burmecian captain raised her head to call out after her before she thought better of it; Fratley would do better than her shock and temper would, and so she collapsed back on the grass and let her breath come back and swore afterwards that she would not be made to do this *again*.

“BYE, OLE HIDJUS,” the smallest of her brood shouted after the swiftly disappearing child, and Edda reflected that he really did not get the point. “SEE YOU LATEOH.”

Amarant Coral had managed to get down the stairs, and due to Iron-Tail Fratley’s either

despicably well hidden or complete lack thereof of alcohol, instead cut himself two thick pieces of bread from the new loaf and was eating them with honey. All he wanted was a large tankard of beer and bits of red meat, preferably not cooked too dry, in a bar in a desert where it never rained. A bar in a desert where it never rained and he wasn't in this continent; a bar in the desert where it never rained and he wasn't on this *world*. He had just settled himself to rest in an only-screamingly-uncomfortable position to chew his crusts like a cow when there was a commotion at the door. This would have been entirely worthy of feigning complete ignorance, only the item in question happened to be unlatched and two Burmecians peered in with panicky eyes.

“Where’s Sir Fratley?” one asked, panting as if from running, both filled with the absolute chagrin of finding the worst possible person at the worst possible time. “Is he home?”

“Damned if I know.” Amarant kept on leisurely eating his bread-and-honey. In fact, Fratley was with King Puck doing whatever Fratley did best, which was probably losing his memory every five minutes and doing whatever Puck ordered. “He’s sure as shit not *here*.”

“There’s a commotion, it’s the daughter —”

“She’s throwing a fit down near by Whiteladies
—”

“Hn,” said the redheaded monk, completely and blissfully unmoved at their agitation.

“Look, my good *sir*,” said the first Burmecian, who looked like a shoemaker rather at the end of his tether ready to grit his teeth, “we have no idea what to do and she won’t let anyone near her and she could *hurt herself*. Do you have *any* idea where Fratley is?”

“Could be anywhere,” Amarant said, even more cheerily.

The men gave exasperated, anxious noises underneath their breath, the Burmecian *tch!* of kick-your-arse disapproval, closing the door behind them in polite but disconnected finality which said that if they came across Amarant again they might adopt an air of mild remonstrance. The ex-bountyhunter set one thickset arm down on the countertop to balance himself, taking another big bite of his halfshod meal to congratulate himself —

until he realized that Frat-face’s mutant lump of a daughter spitting her teeth out in the street was also

Freya's mutant lump of a daughter spitting her teeth out in the street and that was a whole new bloody kettle of uncomfortable guilt-fish.

The bread was suddenly pap in his mouth; it was barely swallowed before he gave a loud, frustrated growl that shook his stitches and rattled the dishes by the water-pump. The Burmecians had barely gotten out of the doorway when Amarant barrelled them over, all muscles and crutches and irritation, clattering down the cobblestones out into the warm drizzle and ignoring their "Hie, wait up!" to stomp away into the rain.

It was not hard to locate the idiotic half-brained spawnlet; she had a set of lungs on her like the bellows in one of the Lindblum forges and was hollering fit to bust. Amarant had only gone down two streets before he caught sight of a small crowd of helpless and annoyed rats; he used his crutch to poke them out of the way before surveying the source of everybody's misery, who had stopped yelling and was flopping down on the ground in a particularly gruesome way. All of her limbs were jerkily splayed out, tail twitching horribly, with her heavily helmeted head banging down on the pavement as she rocked it from side to side; she looked as if she was going through the rigors of

some horrible brain aneurysm for the last time. When any of the concerned onlookers tried to approach her, she gave such a violent lurch and yell that — even though adults — they jumped back from her flailing limbs. It looked like she was dying, painfully and slowly. Small children were crying.

Even Tantalus couldn't have touched that acting ability. Amarant balanced himself heavily on his crutch next to her, unperturbed by flailing limbs; Gudrun hollered and bawled like a colicky Jabberwock. Much to the dismay and private envy of the crowd, Amarant countered this with picking her up by one arm and giving her a thorough shake.

“Nothing to see here,” he drawled to the crowd, turning her over jauntily in midair and shaking her instead by the ankle so that she had to hold on to her helmet to keep it on. ‘Go home. Get on with your lives. I’ll take care of it.’ The shaking stopped, but she dangled charmingly in midair. “Fuck off.”

The Burmecians, shocked into silence, began to melt away. Gudrun, shocked into silence, glared holes at Amarant upside down until he set her rightside-up, which was not until he had slung her over his back like a carcass and limped the entire way back to Fratley’s house with her looking at the

city from an entirely new angle. She did not utter one word or twitch one muscle until he closed the door behind him and set her down on the polished wood of the floor, whereupon she pummelled at his midsection with her not-inconsiderable fists. The ensuing short duel, however, would have made Freya Crescent massage her temples in deep woe.

Amarant bellowed hair-raising curses as her mark found his bandaged stomach; he held her back with his crutch as she impotently struck the air, bellowing equally in small hunched mutant-rage, though he was finding her less small and hunched as she straightened until the top of Freya's helmet brushed parallel to his ribcage. Unable to break through his defenses, Gudrun gave one final battle-cry of anger, rolled back and promptly swept his abandoned plate of bread-and-honey to the floor. Then, panting, they looked at each other.

"You're not pissed off because I shook you," Amarant said levelly. "You're pissed off because I embarrassed you. Guess what, kid. You were embarrassing. Every time you embarrass me, I'm gonna embarrass you thirty times worse until you're so embarrassed that you *die*."

She stared.

“And you want to hit me? Go ahead and hit me, but until you’re strong enough and ugly enough and clever enough, I’m just gonna hit you right back. And because you’re too much of a little shrimp to hit yet, I’m just gonna be grabbing your leg and holding you upside down again, so you better get a *shitload* better than you are before you go walking into Upside Down Land, ’cause you punch like a cave imp.”

The plate hadn’t shattered; Amarant slowly hefted himself along, knowing with a grimace that blood was going to seep through his bandages again. Very painfully, he bent over and picked up the discarded bread, throwing it with a civic mind out the window and collapsing his weight down at the chair Fratley had modified for his daughter.

“Well?” he demanded.

“Sitting in my chair, ugly-butt,” said Gudrun.

“Huh?”

“You’re gettin’ *ugly-butt* on it.”

“That’s the pot calling the kettle black, kid.”

“I’m not a pot!”

Amarant bared his teeth at her. Gudrun, despite the mask of her helmet, bared her teeth back; somehow the tall man seemed to understand the standoff, and both relaxed into a staunch state of Would Attack You But Am Somehow Disinterested At This Point In Time after a few long moments.

“Hnng,” said the monk eventually, feet up on the table in a way that would have made Fratley weep, and Gudrun immediately scampered with as much un-chair-breaking delicacy as she could muster into another chair to adopt the same position. The table creaked dangerously, though the Burmecian’s big feet were nothing on his. “You’re not as freaky-mongoloid as you act. Gumble, right?”

“*Gudrun.*”

“I’m your Uncle Flaming Amarant.”

She mulled that one over. “That’s the dumbest name ever. It’s stupid-dumb. I don’t have an uncle.”

“Sure you do, you little shit. You have an Uncle Zidane and an Uncle Steiner and an Uncle Beatrix, and a bunch of crazy aunts.” At Gudrun’s glazed-eyed look of dumb ignorance, he raised one eyebrow beneath his mop of rough locks; “You don’t mean to

say that Fratboy never introduced you to your ma's *friends?*"

"Sometimes get birthday pressies," she volunteered unhelpfully, as if the quality of the birthday presents was nothing to qualify an aunt or an uncle (demonstrating she knew nothing about the usual quality of birthday presents from aunts and uncles).

"Stuff a chimera up my *ass*." He looked baffled, and not a little affronted. "What a goon. Zidane would've knocked all the stupid outta you long before I had to step in, if he'd had his frilly monkey-boy way. Your dad's a complete fuckin' jerko —"

A fork was thrown Amarant's way, very accurately and hard and destined to embedding itself in his eye if he hadn't held up a cork placemat at the last moment. Only she was allowed to think those things about her father in the black parts of her head, say the words, mime the beatings. "*Don't say swears about my Da, bass'ard!*"

The monk looked at the fork, skidding forlornly across the table, and the deep imprints the tines had made in the gaudy flower-prints of the soft cork. "All right, all right. Hmph —"

“*Hmph.*”

“**Hmph.** If you’re gonna sit here and faff with implements, kid, at least go cut you’n your Uncle Ammy some more bread. It’s hungry work watching you be butt-ugly all day.”

Normally Gudrun would have point-blank refused and maybe writhed on the floor for a bit to drive home her point, but the refreshing tone of the conversation and the deeply exciting chance to use the breadknife — something Fratley had never allowed her to do — was too tantalising to miss out on. She slipped off the delicate chair (something for which it was probably grateful) and padded over to the kitchen to the half-eaten loaf. The mutilation it received once she picked up the jagged-toothed breadknife was horrible to behold.

“Saw it, you little idiot,” Amarant called out, more amused than irritated, but more hungry than amused. “Don’t goddamn *hack* at it. You never cut bread before?”

“Cut bread loads,” she grunted, disintegrating most of what she was cutting into crumb-atoms, large hands enthusiastic lest Fratley burst in and stop her any moment. “Why are you my uncle, chocobo-

brains? Da says you're an idiot stupid —" she improvised wildly — "and you smell."

"I don't *smell*. Bath every day 'cause it pisses down here like the gods' celestial fuckin' lavatory," he said indignantly. "I was a friend of your mama's, pipsqueak, and that's that."

That satisfied her. The bread was brought back to the table; it in no way resembled slices, or anything so much as devastated chunks of something that had once had loaf-shape, but there was also a spoon and blackberry jam and they made a passable meal out of it with glasses of milk. (Amarant couldn't remember the last time he had drunk milk. Ostensibly it had been from a nipple, pre-weaning.) To eating's end Gudrun tipped her helmet back just enough to amplify the snuffling sounds and to let Amarant see bits of something that was either a snout or a chin and very unfortunate either way.

Amarant masticated through a particularly sticky, palate-cleaving morsel of jam in tentatively companionable silence; she chose instead to lick it off the tips of her fingers. They were very much fingers; they could not even pretend to be claws on a dark night. "So why'd you spit your dummy out in public, kid?"

She sucked jam off the bread noisily, reapplied, then ate it. “Killed the teacher.”

He thought over this one. “Money?”

“No.”

“Crime of carnal passion?”

Gudrun made a note to ask her father what a crime of carnal passion was. “No. Was an *accident*. Mostly.”

“H’n.” Amarant contemplated this over his glass of the almost-yellow, fresh farm milk, so creamy you could almost stand a spoon in it and fatal to your arteries. “‘Mostly accidents’ get ten years in the slammer, kid, give or take time out for good behaviour.”

“Won’t. Da’s my Da. Famous.” It looked even more difficult to negotiate her own glass underneath Freya’s red dragoon-helmet, but she managed it somehow, along with a good dose of ineffable smugness. “I can do *anything* and not get in troubs ’cause of Da.”

“Spoilt brat.”

“Lettuce face.”

“Helmet head.”

“Pike-chin.”

When a desperately harried Iron-Tail Fratley came in much later, having sprinted for dear life after a note given by a callow messenger-boy from King Puck’s council-chambers to an aggravated Captain Edda’s practice-field to the now-abandoned corner of Whiteladies back to the unlatched door of his house expecting to find his Gunny in some heinous predicament that only begging and strawberries and a curaga would get her out of, he found her comfortably sitting at the table opposite Amarant Coral — she, who despised strangers — amongst the remnants of rather too much jam.

“‘Lo, da,” Gudrun piped up, just about talky-cheerful for one of the first times of her life (at the murder and at lunch and at three big glasses of milk and at bread knives and red hair and curse-words and the incessant beauty of as many helpings of blackberry preserves as one wanted). “Had lunch with Uncle Flaming Ugly-butt. What’s carnal passion?”

The row went on for *hours*.

5. the dragon

chapter five - the dragon
(eating what's broken)

Ten Years Ago

“This place is a shit hole,” Amarant Coral said.

‘Shit hole’ was not quite the right description for it; Freya could think of a number of maybe better ones, like *lopsided*, and *broken*, and *threadbare*, and if she wanted to think of more words, she could think of *scorched earth* and *not enough money*. Too many of the farms had been razed in Brahne’s attack on Burmecia, burnt stone and boggy fields, the walls all broken on the tea-fields and the coffee-vines that had once steadily filled the coffers of the kingdom. It was still better than it was inside the city; but the people were poor and proud, the Burmecian ex-diaspora from Alexandria and Treno and Lindblum to come and reclaim the land of their forefathers. All of them had been given parcels of territory; and now engineers came with their families to break the sod, jobless actors to tend the vine, Cleyran priests to try

and put things back together. The harvest that year would not be good. Everything looked worse in the aftermath of the nightly storms, the wet winds from the East, scenery that was meant to be dewy looking just bloody drowned. The houses looked sad and the fields were tiny, brackish, stagnant lakes.

Actually, ‘shit hole’ was probably appropriate.

They stopped seldom, slept less, and Freya quietly purchased food from the farmsteaders while Amarant hung around in the soggy yards like an incurable disease; she shook a number of hands, and talked about the weather, and the red-haired bounty-hunter growled in turn at the slinking dogs near the verandah who looked disgruntled at the thought of biting him. Many of the families would not accept payment; she slipped gil into the canvas and frieze pockets of the children, and doffed her hat, and went on her merry way.

“I hate it,” she said, out of earshot, more to the blue sky and the dusty road and the looming mountains as she and Amarant walked. He was something close to surprised at her acquiesce; Freya was a dyed-in-the-wool Burmecian patriot, and he had expected her to at least *try* to break his kneecaps. “I hate the poverty. I saved the world for,

what, a quarter of my people suffering Qu fever every winter and not two gil to rub together?”

“There’s no fuckin’ money anywhere,” her companion grunted, both of them unwrapping the greaseproof paper of one of their packets of sandwiches as they walked. “I look at the bounties going nowadays, I take three shits and die laughing. The highest one wouldn’t give me *yan cack*. Lani used to make more gil on the goddamn street corner. — Damn it, this one’s cheese again.”

“You think I eat cheese just because I’m a Burmecian? Here, I’ll swap you a ham-and-egg for that watercress and mustardseed. — So what on earth did you *do*? Didn’t Zidane offer you a job?”

“Like I’m gonna hang around Alexandria while he moons over Queenie? Fuck that noise, Crescent. Went into bodyguarding, but nobody’d take me because I’m *me* —”

“Because they don’t like you? I don’t blame them —”

“Because they’re *scared*! Hmph. Anyway, Lani got this goddamn gig putting on a big frilly dress and protecting this stupid scientist all day long, no idea who, she gets to keep her axe in her handbag

while she goes to Treno parties. Me, I walked city to city bumming drinks for that saving the world thing.”

“You couldn’t sit still, could you.” There was more than a little wistfulness.

“Who’d want to? Everywhere you go it’s just rebuilding and all the bitching you could eat. People can’t shut up about the goddamn dwarves.”

“Ah,” she murmured. “Yes. That, just because Condie Petie isn’t in rubble. Blame the other species. The Burmecians do it too, of course. Ever since we attained norm-status we can’t shut up for emulating humans. We don’t even like others settling here any more, after the war, protecting our little rainblasted heath. Burmecia for the Burmecians. Can you imagine that? A Burmecian calling someone else *subber*, or a *demi*? The sheer and brutal hypocrisy of it?”

The red-headed man hulking next to her grunted through a mouthful of ham-and-egg. “There’s nowhere good here any more, rat.”

“I don’t know if there ever was in the first place. It’s all shite.”

“Hmph. Bet you’re too depressed to eat your bacon and tomato?”

“You lose. I’m not quite that maudlin yet, Coral.”

They ate away the distance on stoic feet; on the second night, when they were sitting at a stile high on a hill eating yet more of their impregnable supply of sandwiches (all beginning to taste the same) they saw the dragon in the red of the evening. It was too late to try to pursue, or even stop eating; it was carrying three limp sheep, fire-blasted and not at all sheep-like any more, and it was already a disappearing glitter of a silhouette in the sky in the direction of Gizamaluke’s Grotto and the Burmecian highlands. It was slow, enormous, vaguely malevolent in the curl of the horn and the twist of the tail. It was at the top of the food chain, the most feared predator, and it knew it very well.

“Fuck me,” said Amarant eloquently, after a while, through lettuce-and-pickle.

“I’d rather not, if it’s all the same to you.” Freya brushed the crumbs off her coat, eyes still to the sky. “That one had a litter, if it was bringing home food; it had already gorged itself beforehand. Bloody hell, I hate killing hatchlings. They have huge limpid eyes.”

There was a noise deep in the bountyhunter's throat that was a *tch* of distaste. "You should be paying me more for this."

"I'm not paying you at all."

"Exactly."

The sun had dipped into the west, tomorrow's destination; Freya shaded her eyes to it, hand cupped over to the brilliant gold, the farmlands of Burmecia spread out in all directions like a rolling quilt. To the west was the grain, the small few dots of cattle and tame yankin, to the east the bruising of dark clouds and the haze of rain on Burmecia's capital.

"We've outrun the storm, at least." She scooped at the soft earth with her foot, burying their discarded wax-paper, pack weighing her slim figure down like the strangest sort of snail. Amarant looked at the broken fences and the dying sun and the countryside all around him, and wondered what he was doing there with his stomach full of sandwich, and wanted a beer. "For now. It'll probably be on us tomorrow. We'll find shelter in one of the less infested caves. Are you sure you still want to do this?"

She was looking at Amarant keenly, and he scowled. Sometimes the rat was too damn psychic and he hated that, because all his life he had lead with one and a half expressions and there she was reading him like a stupid book. “Gizamaluke’s Grotto is half a day’s walk away. You could always, well, sod off.”

“Yeah, well.” The sunset lit his hair on fire, a halo of rough crimson, hidden eyes moodily looking somewhere to the south. “I haven’t got anything better to do.”

“Stop it with the flattery, Coral. I may swoon.”

“Fuck you.” It was said without rancour; Freya was struck by the dissatisfaction on his face more than anything. “If I knew where a bar was other than Treno or Lindblum or Alexandria I’d be there like a goddamn shot. It’s just all the, the... *same*.”

“The same people, the same values —”

“— the same damn miseries, the same drinks —”

“— the same destinies, the same streets, the same weather.”

There was an almost embarrassed silence. It is never nice to share the same depression.

“Hunting dragons is something new,” she continued, steel-bright, deliberate. Freya straightened, tail whipping about her ankles, groping about blindly for her helmet before swinging it with practiced ease upon her head. She wanted to go without it; the night was going to be balmy, but the dragon-helm was part of her skin and bone and to be without was a nakedness her mental state could ill afford. “We’ve been eating too many sandwiches. We’re getting whingey. Do let’s go to the mountain where we can eat some actual meat.”

There was a far-off thunderclap as, over the city, the storm started.

They kipped in a barn again, near the last farmstead, Amarant collapsing in the prickly yellow hay and listening to the cows lowing as Freya continued on some kind of polite conversation about the wilting turnips in the fields; then an odd sort of dinner — which going without would have meant murder on his part, maybe eating the Burmecian dragoon’s leg — of little fried mushrooms and porridge with fresh farm cream and bacon and hot tomato and toast. There was even a mug of weak

beer; more like the kind of acidic thing a yeti might urinate, they both agreed, but better than *nothing*.

And then there was nothing to do but rest on the least irritating parts of the bales and listen to the pitter-patter on the half-repaired tiles. The rain let up when it was deep into the dark Burmecian night and they squelched their way off with a lantern, feeling pleasantly full. The dragoon took off her steaming waterproofs; he held the gutting glass and candle as they picked their way up the hills, and the dark and the wet and the flickering tallow sent them back about a hundred years. They picked up faggots of wet wood, in halfhearted promise of a fire later on just in case through some miracle it dried out, and trudged on.

The mountains loomed over them like a sentry, until they were in the teeth of them and rapidly ascending goatlike with their packs slung over their shoulders and the clouds threatening to burst once more. The rolling quagmire that had meant to be Burmecian grass turned to mix with scoria; the plateau of the kingdom spread out beneath them, blanketed in fog, and Freya finally said *fuck it* and they set up camp in a cave. It was too low for dragons. There were probably, at worst, a couple of Imps who hadn't made a quick buck in months: not

particularly frightening. There turned out to be not even Imps.

“All the Burmecian mountains are like this, even just a little off the highlands,” she said, more for want of exercising her vocal chords than giving her friend a lesson in geography; he was hanging the lantern on a sort of natural shelf so that the candle danced around the high dimness. They’d reached the cathedral of the hole; the stalactites of the ceiling were far-off tacks, wreathed in darkness, barely pierced by the single candle. “Thick forests and caves in such a cluster they’re like holed cheese. Dragon country. Some of us came out of the mountains, you know, used to live like this, it’s quite nice *really* —”

“I suffered this rare disease as a kid which means I couldn’t give a fuck,” he grunted, experimentally flopping to sit on the dusty cave floor. It needed a sweep. There were probably bats. ‘Quite nice really’ was like making do with one toe for each foot and sticks for arms. “Can we get a fire started before we die?”

The fire was dreadful and smoky; the wood hadn’t quite dried out. But it was warm, and they were tired, shedding wet clothes to put on poles near

the warmth while they sat on a blanket in their underthings. It was all right for Amarant to just be in a wrap around his waist; his only problem was that there was a lot of him to be unclothed, and he took up almost the whole blanket by himself in a lump of wetly-shining greenblue flesh. Freya primly kept on her undershirt and breeches, so the most racily exposed thing were her boneslim ankles. Her hair stuck out like a dandelion clock; she was far too thin, all skinny arms and legs and not even the Burmecian hips that usually sunk the Mist Continent — but his eyes followed the way that the thin cotton stuck to her ribs without him knowing it. She went entirely peachfuzz after a wetting, the eyelash-width dusting of grey fur all over her body sticking up like a human's goosebumps.

God, he hadn't been laid in a while if he was admiring the way her neat, slim little waist turned in. He could at least be staring at her breasts.

Freya fell back to her elbows, thin blanket over hard stone, and let herself relax to the flat of her tired back before she caught his gaze; she stared, half-accusatory, feeling suddenly naked and exposed in the sheer wake of his gaze. She gave him the two-middle-claws up gesture that meant nothing genteel in any culture anywhere; he at least grunted.

“Freija,” he said, and his accent thickened curiously, the slight slurring and slickening on the y emphasised in his voice in a way he’d never done before. “*Freija-go-bri.*”

“What’s that mean?” To which Amarant just glared, as if answering something he’d said out loud to a potential audience of thousands of bats and one Burmecian was sheer bitchiness. “I don’t know the language.”

“It just means —” He waved one hefty hand vaguely, irritable. “— it doesn’t translate well, it’s sort of — *messy like a spider.*”

“You make no sense in your old age.”

“You have *no* tits in *your* old age.”

They had a five-minute war wherein she won by poking him in the eye with a blunt claw; backs to the fire, little by little, they fell asleep.

Which was no good at all, because when the sun rose she somehow managed to find herself snuggled halfway into his armpit with him flat on his back — there was a lot of back — and one of his hands splayed over her hip. There wasn’t much hip but

there was a lot of hand, and too much finger on what constituted anatomically as backside and base of tail, and they both woke up at once to stare at each other.

His heavy-browed eyes were dark, chocolate-brown and gold-flecked. She'd never noticed that before. He smelled like rain and wet; like old canvas, like smoke from the fire, like something alarmingly like wet dog, and there was a sharp stab of — something she didn't dare contemplate — in the pit of her stomach. It was wholly and utterly uninvited.

“Amarant Coral,” she said, in a voice that managed to be sleepy-conversational, “you have your hand on my arse.”

His heavy fingers drummed tattoo on her breeches, but there was something furtive in the shadows of his eyes until he braced himself and his shock of red hair fell over his face. “Please don't say you call *this* an arse, rat.”

Moment thankfully broken, she raised one slim and powerful clawed foot to jab him in the stomach. He rolled off the blanket with a pathetic *oof*; she started rifling through her coat for what was the most important start to the day, ie, tea. “Water, *water*, I forgot all about the bloody water —

Amarant, go and see if you can find a spring or stream or something, outside or in the cave, I'm not staying here and hefting a bucket for a mile for my tea. Don't even *think* about saying 'no', you will not like me in the mornings when I'm cross."

Zidane or Steiner had always been the ones sent off in high dudgeon to find water. Amarant did not enjoy his sudden promotion to wet-diviner, and muttered curses at the cave walls as he lumbered off to see what he could see. The cave went back a long way; he was pretty damn sure he hadn't even reached the cathedral of it, too many steps in, dank walls and his fire smoking on a piece of slow-burning wood as he squinted. He had to hit a couple bats with the bucket, but eventually he found something that resembled a freshwater well half-dripping off the limestone walls that satisfied his laziness to fill the bucket full of cold cave-water. When he came back, drips sloshing out with every step, Freya was sitting beside the rebuilt fire eating one of the slightly squashy oranges that the farmer's wife had packed. Her hair still looked like a frightened gnoll's.

"I found it," he volunteered, setting the bucket down beside her. She eyed it. "Rock spring."

“My goodness. So you’re good for something after all.”

“What, no ‘thank you’? I forgot about you being such a fuckin’ bitch in the mornings.”

“So you found water! What do you want, the Queen’s Award For Industry?”

He gave her the finger, but otherwise found discretion to be the better part of valour as Freya filled her kettle. She set it on the iron spider over the fire; she poked at the coals a bit with a stick, and did things with tin mugs as he sat on a rock like a glaring gargoyle, and she broke a record for how fast a single Burmecian could down a cup of bitter black tea without breathing. Afterwards, she took a deep sigh. “All right. All right, all better now.”

“Fuck, I hope so.”

She burst out laughing, and judiciously poured herself another cupful from the teapot. “I know I’m dreadful. Look, I’m sorry, thank you for finding the water. You bring out something *argumentative* in me. Do you have any idea how much I’ve longed for a fight lately?”

Well, that sounded familiar. Pity that the bounty-hunting market was falling apart, or he’d

recommend she join up. “What, did that goddamn boyfriend ‘forget’ to get you laid?”

An orange was thrown with bitter precision at his head. Amarant eliminated the middle man, and proceeded to peel and eat it. “All right. Let’s make a rule. This little jaunt of ours is going to have topics that are not going to come up on pain of death. Here’s mine. Fratley and my sex life regarding thus, my kingdom’s political escapades and the regrowth of the Burmecian conservative right in the wake of the war —”

“Was that last sentence meant to make *any goddamn sense?*”

“— Puck, Cleyra, anything of that nature, you know — do you have anything?”

He thought a moment, and popped a piece of orange in his mouth. “Lani.”

“No Lani.”

“Girl stuff. Anybody who’s pregnant. Knitting. That shit.”

“Who on earth do you think you’re with? No pregnancy. No *girl stuff*. What on earth is ‘girl stuff’, anyway? Oh, oh, I’ve thought of another. Any

parts of my anatomy that do not make your personal spec.”

“That’s all of ’em.”

“Fuck you.”

“Here: you giving me lectures on the history of *everything*.”

“It’s not my fault. It just sort of comes out of my *mouth*. No history. No diseases.”

“Diseases?”

“Men are boring when they’re ill. Don’t catch anything, you big blue lump.”

“I don’t think I ever *have*, rat. *Ever*.”

“Then we shan’t have a problem. Anything else?”

“Eggs.” Amarant made as if he was thinking very deeply on the subject as she ran her claws through her hair, drinking another cup of tea as if it was lifeblood and air, standing so that her tail beat a tattoo on the cave floor. It was less dusty than it had been when he’d left it; she’d obviously swept it in a fit of womanliness. Her tail was too naked without the usual twist of crimson. She was too naked without her coat and helmet. It was almost a relief

when she washed her face in the remnants of the cave-water and put them on, as if it hurt to look at her otherwise. “Naked sunbathing.”

“Go to hell.” The dragoon was laughing even as she thrust a tin mug of something brewed sin-black in his hands, which turned out to be coffee. They were out in camp together — sharing a half-assed breakfast before the fight — and suddenly it all came flooding back, every single damn moment, every breath and every cup she used to pass full of Dagger’s awful herbal tea. The world briefly locked into place, into something that made sense again, simple and clear. You can’t go home again: except when you *can*, and he had been granted reprieve.

“Knock that back, Coral.” She spoke his bolt of self-realisation, as if she had felt it in kind, giving it breath as their spirits rose. It was terminally embarrassing intimacy for both of them, and there were twitches in their mouths like violent lopsided smiles. “It’s been far too long since we killed something together.”

He was strapping his claws on with one hand, even as he gulped, searing the tip of his tongue and not caring. “So what the hell are we waiting for?”

(The morning sunshine was as good and sweet as it ever was, and ever would be.)

6. life creeping in

chapter six - life creeping in (the apple and the tree)

It would be nice modesty to say that the person who was most surprised when Puck turned out to be a good king was Puck himself; however, modesty was never one of His Majesty's sins, and he never gave in to admiring self-reflection that he turned out so well. Puck had always expected to turn out well. What he lacked in handsomeness he more than made up for in brute cunning. What he missed in nobility he more than made up for in brutal canniness: faltering towards oblivion, Burmecia had risen from the proverbial grave in no small part due to King Puck The Ruthless Bastard. At thirteen, he'd bilked Treno out of so many trading deals that the Mayor had had to have a lie down, wheedled Cid into an unutterably unfair peacekeeping deal that the Regent was *still* befuddled and irascible over (excuse: Eiko had just fallen into her third power generator) and made a number of arrangements with the dwarves that not many people knew much about. He was

regarded as a total tit, a regular smug little puddle of mu piss; but a total tit you didn't cross, because Burmecia was remobilizing so quickly it was tripping over its thickly-clustered spears and Puck was renowned for having very mean and immature ideas about payback. Even many of his own people didn't really get on with him. He was not into fair play. He wasn't really *cricket*.

Though it was unfair in comparison to the man who stood behind his throne. What stopped the slight-built rat from treading the line to brilliant political organizer to petty tyrant was and ever would be Fratley. Without Iron-Tail's gentle, pervasive guidance, Puck would have gotten up to rather a lot of things that would have characterised him badly in history's harsh light — constant searches for immortality, requiring more living space, making God with his own two hands, searching for Cauldrons of Doom, breeding generations of small quick-witted orphans to go down mines — and all of that ilk. Fratley was the heart. Fratley was Burmecia's morals, Burmecia's tradition, the way of the Dragoon. Puck was Burmecia's surreptitiously placed crowbar.

At nineteen, the young King of Burmecia would never be a raving beauty: he was tall, dark-haired

like the Burmecian strain from the west (who had ever unfortunate connotations to do with stealing anything not nailed down), thin-muzzled and dun-furred and clever. He never washed up well. He looked like he dressed in fine clothes only because they had fallen off the back of a wagon, all gypsy black eyes, whip-thin and probably in need of another haircut. He was as charming as a puddle of grease with bits in it. At least he had outgrown the spiked helmet.

For him, Fratley was advisor, counsellor, minister, bodyguard, and father. As such, he fell into the role of being Gudrun's older brother, in a sense; Gudrun *loathed him*. He was the type of elder brother who would hold something over your head and laugh meanly as you reached up in vain. He was unfortunately too quick, or she would have long ago attempted to rip his arm off and beat him to death with it. Much to her sullen dismay, Puck found this unbearably charming.

Gudrun Crescent had received two days' lack of dessert for crimes against the neighbourhood and a long lecture never to touch the breadknife again. Amarant Coral and Iron-Tail Fratley's fight resulted in Fratley getting a migraine and Amarant having complications with his wound, which added days on

to his bedrest and a lot more swearing to his nighttime vocabulary. It was a sullen house that His Royal Majesty King Of Burmecia settled on, slipping through the back door, generously helping himself to a slice of bread as he took off an unfetching hat put on for the purposes of concealment. He didn't really need it; dressed in slightly shabby clothes suited Puck so well that hardly anybody took notice of him when he was in them, a disguise all of its own.

(The kitchen had a gently lived-in look. It was scrubbed clean until it flushed uncomfortably, nicked and dented in places. Once upon a time the house had been Freya's, and then it had been a tip. She'd kept her weapons in the pantry and little jars of polishing oil in the spice rack, and loose-leaf tea blew around like rose petals in a romance novel.)

The lady of the household was first to notice his arrival; she was huddled in a big chair two normal Burmecians could have sat in by the window, facing the wrong way so that her huge bound feet could drum against the cloth-hung stone walls, blankets around her head in lieu of helmets so that she could look like a cloaked demon from the deep and read a picture book at the same time. When she espied the leader of her kingdom, she stuffed Freya's dented

helmet back on over her head underneath the deep shadows of the blankets, and sighed pointedly in the hopes that he would go away.

“Howdy, duckling,” Puck said amiably, as she ignored him in favour of turning the page with her thick discoloured tail. (It had a pink bow on it. Her father was ever painstaking: his daughter would never be pretty, but he could at least make her look as if more time had been spent on her than anyone else. Eleven o’clock in the morning, and the pink was already looking grey.) His voice lilted, deliberately dirt-common, and the tail swished like an angry cat’s. He loved his job. “And ’ow’s my ickle girl this morning, then?”

She grunted. “Pig. Pig-pig. Don’t eat all the apples.”

The king paused mid-apple, then ate the rest of it. “I hear you put Cap’n Eddie to the doctor. You’re an ornament to the nation, you.”

“Nnnngnghhh.”

“‘Lock her up’, they’d say, ‘put her in the zoo’, they’d say, but *naw* — ‘bring back the biff!’ sez me. You ever want a job, right, I’ll make you my

bodyguard. You can roll on enemies to the throne, it'd be just spiffy."

Gudrun continued reading about bears who ate small golden-haired children and were not prosecuted. (Fratley had had to change the entire ending of that story about the sweet princess who has an ill-fitting shoe, just to include more cannibalism. His daughter enjoyed things that ate other things whole and alive. She was looking into it as a sideline.) "Hnnhkkkhngggghgh."

"Look, how about I give you a list of people I want sat on, just between you'n me, hush-hush? Nobody would know, we'd just say a passing hippo fell on 'em. I bet it'd *look* like a passing hippo fell on 'em."

Before Gudrun could commit regicide, Iron-Tail Fratley wandered into the room, still smelling faintly and embarrassing like soap: it was washing-day. (Only he could maintain dignity with suds still on his claws. He looked staunch pinning sheets up. This is a rare talent.) "Your Majesty! What are you —"

"Hustle, hustle," the king answered, slightly incomprehensibly. "You'll spare me an hour or ten of your time, won't you, Frats? Something's cropped up. You and I had better take care of it, I don't trust

the other useless gimpy bastards in my cabinet.’ (“Swearing is *not clever*,” Fratley said, mainly at his daughter.) “You’re with me, right? Totally? What, what? Your bleedin’ *laundry*? Easy solution, marry the bimbo down the street, she’ll do it. There have to be half a dozen bimbos down the street who’ll do it even without marrying you. If you get my *drift*.”

The dragoon pointedly did not get his drift. “Well, I mean — of course, my King. I am your devoted servant. But you’ll need to just let me find a babysitter.”

“Haven’t you got that Coral guy here? Can’t he do it?”

“*His* being here is precisely why I need a babysitter.”

“Do *not* need a babysitter,” Gudrun announced loudly. “Am not a *baby*. I can do the laundry, *too*, nine times.”

“Shove a stake in the ground and tie her to it, will ya?” the king interrupted. “Though she’d probably just chew off ’er leg, never mind — I’d’ve sent a runner unless time was *important*, Ironsides. We go *now*, okay, or I have to go alone, and you don’t even

want to begin how much I'm gonna make that *blow* on a long-term basis."

Even on the subject of his daughter, which sat side-by-side with psychotic stubbornness, in the face of Puck's lazy authority Fratley still wavered; it didn't help that Gunny was sending him a look he knew all too well, which promised the biting of any nanny he convinced to sit with her. Emphasis on *convincing*, which would eat up valuable time: and she was being so dreadfully stubborn lately, with fingers pointed squarely at That Man for blame.

(It did not make him angry. It made him afraid.)

Fratley gave all assembled a stricken look; it was only momentary, before he turned tail and fled back up the stairs to fling open the door of the guest bedroom unannounced. Amarant was arranged amidst a genocide of blankets, trying very hard to sleep, and out of pure habit and the red hair on the pillows the dragon-knight primly pulled open the curtains. His guest rolled over, accompanied by a grunt of agonizing pain from the movement. It was a heartening sound, if you were Fratley.

"If you're trying to make me hate your guts even more," the monk said through a mouthful of pillow, "it's working well."

“I have to leave the house for a little while,” the dragoon said briskly, because briskly worked; the less time he wasted his life talking to Amarant Coral the better. “You and Gudrun are going to be alone.”

“I heard you loud and clear the last time, ratboy. ‘Stay away from my misbegotten womb-dropping’, yeah, whatever. It’s not *hard* to keep me away from that little shit —”

Gritted teeth. “Please stop any of her attempts to go near the washbasket, if she makes them. If she wants lunch and asks your permission to use anything sharp or with more than four tines, say *no*. She won’t answer the door, so I’m not worried about that, and you needn’t either.”

The rough red hair spilled off the pillows again as Amarant’s head came up, too much to see his expression. It didn’t matter. The other man could guess at it anyway. “Nice backpeddling there. I’d gloat if I didn’t think I was going to blow my chunks any moment now. Okay, if the sproglet wants to set her damn self on fuckin’ fire I’ll dump some water on her. Happy? I couldn’t sell her on the black market if I tried, I’d have to pay *them*. Hell, I couldn’t pimp that thing in Treno on a dark night —”

“If you are trying to make me hate you even more,” Fratley said levelly, “it won’t work, because I already loathe you to the very depth and breadth my heart can reach. Believe me, Mr. Coral, go back to sleep with my blessing. My daughter will be best looked-after if you don’t even try. Just give her permission for *nothing*.”

“This is me pretending you’re goddamn gone already,” said Amarant, and dropped his head back on the pillow.

The Burmecian’s feet sounded down the wooden steps again, light as rain as all of the rat-folk did; the same pitter-patter as the drops outside, which he was slowly coming to grips with, cool and constant and clear. It was white noise now. He waited long moments; then the pitter-patter came back, with Fratley flinging open the door, looking at the other man with a queer and nigh-on furtive expression.

“And strawberry jam gives her hives,” he said. “She mustn’t have strawberry jam.”

“How many years did it take for her to piss without you supervising?”

“Seven,” the Burmecian said, and disappeared again. This time, he did not reappear.

The house was silent. Voices called out on the street, as they always did — and in a language that Amarant could fluently understand, which was a change from the last few years of his life — carts were pulled over the cobbles, stretched taught with oilcloth so that the rain did not spoil the contents. He wondered if the running joke was still that the kingdom’s main export was waterproofs, and then he remembered whose running joke that had been, and he stopped wondering.

It was a depressingly short while before his door opened again and the Helmet Monster clumped in, flinging herself down to sit on the end of the bed until the bed creaked in panicked warning. His calf was prodded judiciously by a stubby-clawed finger, no less sharp for being covered in grubby grey canvas: shit, she had hands as big as bread loaves. “Can I murderkill the milkman?”

“Why the do you want to kill the milkman?” (It was a stupid question, he reflected immediately afterwards. Who didn’t.)

“Don’t,” she said promptly. “Want a sandwich and want a pasty. Workin’ my way down.”

“You were put on Gaia to torture me.”

“You were put on Gaia to be a *dumb face*. So can I, Uncle Dumbface?”

“You can throw yourself into the goddamn waterbutt.”

“You’re Uncle Dumbface because you have a *dumb face*. Can I?”

“Least I know where you get your comebacks from.”

“And your beard looks like you got a rash. Can I?”

“I said the part about the waterbutt, right?”

“Can I *please, now?*” He looked wavering. Gudrun sweetened the deal. “If you don’t I’ll holler’n holler until I’m sick.”

The response was imminently desirable: she was walked downstairs upside-down, pressing on the steps with her hands as Amarant grabbed her ankles, still rumpled with sleep and poking her every moment with one of his crutches against her shin. (At least when both of them lumbered, they were as horrifically ungraceful as the other, the slow bent-legged shuffle.) She was dropped at the bottom squarely on her head; wearing a helmet, this did not

make much of a difference, especially considering the old dragoon helmets were made to outlast the Reunion. The redheaded monk let Gudrun cut the bread; then he collapsed in a chair, stretching out his burning middle, and watched her smirk triumphantly through lunch. Neither of them said another word for a great while, which pleased both immensely, as talk was cheap and lunch so short.

He was slowly coming to terms with the fact that the lumpy thing was Freya's, though considering the layers of cloth, Freya's by Vivi Orunita. It was eerie. Freya Crescent to him was endlessly twenty-one, and the sprog placed her squarely in motherhood territory, where the Burmecian dragoon was clearly *not* meant to go. Her own damn fault, he thought, watching Gudrun, her own goddamn fault for everything, she should never have been a mother, look what she got.

“Why d’you wear that helmet?”

It was out before he even thought about it. Fratley's daughter paused to devour the remains of her fourth cheese and tomato and pickle and apple slices sandwich (neither she nor Amarant were born cooks: *lots* was the best condiment), and set down the crusts.

“All dragon knights wear helmets, rubbish-brains,” she said, in her best airy don’tcarish voice.

“If I see any, I’ll tell ’em so.”

Gudrun pounded one fist on the table, just to show defiance, and then started on her fifth sandwich. (Amarant, who was meant to be on a diet of mainly liquids, started his sixth.) “Hmph. Goin’ to be a *dragoon*.”

“You.” His disbelief was palpable.

“Yes!”

“A *dragoon*.”

“Yes!”

“Call me when they do, kid,” said the monk. “The day the rats are *that* desperate that they’ll make Little Miss Cripple a dragon knight, I *have* to come watch. Everybody will probably be dead and there won’t be any animals left who can hold a spear in their mouths. For one thing, you ain’t big enough for a dragoon. You’re big enough for *two dragoons*.”

He expected another fork thrown at him, and had prudently cleared the table of them earlier: however, the girl did not even react, just shrugging her sloped shoulders in a faintly aggravated way as the

sandwich disappeared underneath the shadows of the helmet. It was like watching a Black Mage eat, if the Black Mage had no manners whatsoever. “I know. I’ll be one, even so. My Da’s famous. So was Ma, and I’ll jus’ sit on anyone and squash ’em flat if they say no. People’re scared of me. Dragon knights have *got* to be scary.”

Never mind her mother. “I’ve shit scarier things than your dad.”

This time, he did get something thrown at him, an apple in a rather skilful overarm as her muscles bunched underneath her shirt. Amarant just caught it, and took a big deliberate bite out of it as she snorted in disdain. She had an excellent snort. She sounded like a horse throwing a fit. “Da’s *old*. Bit sissy,” she added guardedly, as if daring him to agree. “Doesn’t know *how*. Me, I can do lots of things.”

“How the fuck are you gonna *jump*? It’d take a goddamn catapult to get you up into the air.”

For some reason, that obviously charmed her, as she guffawed like the aforementioned horse finally giving up the ghost. “Who needs to jump? I can always jump down offa something high and squash ’em.”

For some reason, that obviously charmed *him*; her donkey-strong determination was both irritating and sort of cute, in a delusional throwing-up in his mouth way. Amarant took a huge bite of ham and pickle, and ignored the urge to scratch his bandages. (They faced each other off, eye to eye over the table, two sets of heavy elbows weighing down on the wood in the gloomy rain-lit room.) “You have shit balance, kid. Your tail looks like you were growin’ a third leg and forgot about it later. You and a polearm? Don’t make me crap laughing.”

“Thought ‘bout that.” Her hands waved around expressively as she reached for a drink of her fruitwater. She looked despicably smug. “So what I do is, is I take the pike an’ I break it in two, and then I hit ‘em with the two bits, and then I squash ‘em.”

It was a deceptively simple tactic. It wasn’t bad, actually. Amarant just snorted; and then, before he could help himself —

“Your mother wouldn’t think much of that, kid.”

“Why not?” Gudrun sounded curious, or at least what curious would sound like through three mouthfuls.

“Well, how the hell would you go about squashin’ *me*?”

“Wait ’till I’m bigger and go to big-people classes,” she said darkly. “I go to the baby classes, but they’re *stupid* — all you do is hit a wooden thing. I can hit forty wooden things and break ’em. Hmph. No use. When do you get hit by wooden things anyway? They never come hit you. In the older classes you hit each other. I’d like those. I could hit everyone, no trouts.”

The redhatted figure pushed her crusts around her plate, rocking back in her chair a little; the rain was letting up, as much as rain ever let up in Burmecia, with the thin sunshine shining through all the dancing dustmotes on the table and hitting the dents on Freya’s old helmet. Gudrun traced an old scratch in the scrubbed-clean polish of the oak table before bursting out, “Uncle Amajerk, what was Mama like?”

Amarant tossed his hair with a sort of low, angry *nnggh* noise, mouth twisted in a grimace. “*Don’t* tell me Ratboy never told you about your mother.”

“He says she was good all the time. And never did anythin’ wrong. And was the goodest and the best and hit everyone down and never swore and

was like an angel come to earth,” she said, with the long practiced air of something oft-recited and oft-told. “Hitting’s good but the other stuff is *hellboring*.”

“Hmph. He’s lying, kid. Your mama could swear like a sailor and ate like a goddamn horse. And she was *never* good.”

“Not ever?”

He thought about Freya, who could out-noble the whole earth and the sea and the stars contained therein. “Maybe a little.”

That contented her. It was with extra happy relish that Gudrun ate the rest of her sandwich; and Amarant didn’t touch his, far away, in a place where a silver-haired Burmecian had her delicate feet up on the chair next to her as she generously stole things from his plate and ate them before he could snatch them back. The (relatively) little mutant pushed her chair away from the table with much scraping of legs; she sprang to stand up, and looked at the hulking monk furtively from the shadows.

“Help do the laundry,” she demanded, and she offered him his crutches.

Amarant held her upside down all the way to the washbasket.

7. the inevitable

chapter seven - the inevitable (the sweet and the bitter)

Ten Years Ago

Amarant Coral was crushed up against Freya Crescent's lean, skinny little body, soaking wet with their mingled sweat, both of them panting for breath as they scrabbled against each other. The entire scenario looked excellent on paper. Maybe even a little tantalising. Interesting, anyway, at the very least, though you could also call Lani giving a lapdance to the Stellazzio Queen 'interesting', and at that point it stops becoming a compliment. Unfortunately, the details that brought the entire thing down were numerous; the biggest and most obvious letdown was the fact that they were wedged in a mountain crack and screaming at each other at the tops of their voices, the Burmecian dragoon elbowing him in the face as they both squirmed in their dirtwalled crawlspace and were pummelled by showers of pebbles from the top of a tiny chasm.

The sweat was out of long ordeal and panic. The crushing was fracturing her ribs. There was a green dragon stomping above them, and it was *angry*.

“All right, *you* try to pass me the bag —”

“I can’t **reach** the bag, rat!”

“*I don’t care! Try!*”

Far away, the call of a green dragon is a low and nearly musical noise. It is a long, continuous bleat, mournful, a ululation that echoes off the mountains. Close up and furious, the call sounds more like this: RARAWARARARAWARARARA-EEEEEEEEEEEEOOOHHH. Screamed at high decibels right in their ears, the two warriors were finding it less than pleasant; Freya was ready to bash her head against the rock to try to at least attain unconsciousness for a pleasant and hearing-impaired death, if the worst came to the worst.

One large dusky hand was anchored on her shoulder as her companion took a heroic dive for the bag, which had the effect of nearly dislocating it as Amarant transferred his weight wholly to her. She was forced to admit that her idea for them to make a jump for the tiny little crack in the earth, deep but barely wide, had been a bad one: they weren’t dead,

but this had to be nearly as uncomfortable. They were alive, anyhow. Surely that gave her some kind of points award. Then again, their situation was precarious — the dragon above them, frustrated and annoyed, alternated between stomping around their hiding place (which let loose showers of rock) and scrabbling down at the top of the crack (which let loose even more showers of rock). Amarant had lost the satchel in the jump, grazing up both his arms red raw and bleeding, and she sympathised greatly only her thigh had been gouged and she was bleeding like a stuck catoblepas. Both of them were singed, wounded, flailing, stupid, clumsy and clutching, panting for survival with dust clinging to their sores.

She'd not felt so alive in a *year*.

“Move your goddamn foot, I almost *have* it —”

The crack was more or less cone shaped. They were stuck in the bottom of the rocky wedge, with the satchel at the very bottom, too tight for either of them to move to get it more fully. Freya sucked in the hardest breath she could possibly manage to wriggle herself up, her shoulders screaming as she lifted on either side of the wall, until she heard his low grunt of triumph as the blasted thing was finally snagged. It was more felt; the dragon was howling

so loudly that communication was only attained by aggravated screaming in each other's ears. Both of them brought the bag between them, trying to open it at once, her fingers catching on his fingers until they somehow got the buckles undone and got to the most precious cargo: rows of potions, safely padded so that they could survive at least three earthquakes, both of them snagging and breaking off the necks of the bottles rather than bothering with the wax seals. The wedge was immediately filled with the strong smell of something very nearly like eucalypts and cough-syrup and grapefruit oil as they drank, and indiscriminately splashed themselves and each other. Amarant grimly pulled the buttons of her breeches open, forcing his fingers past the leather, dumping the remnants down to make the leather and the underpinning of cotton a sticky mess. She hardly squeaked.

“Did you really *have* to —”

“It's the only way it'll fuckin' stick, idiot.”

“RARAWARARARAWARARARA-
EEEEEEEEEEEEOOOHHH!”

“Makes me feel like I bleedin' wet myself!” Her mother — and Fratley — would have given her a frown for that, talking like the daughter of a

dustman, but the sudden wet healing rush had her blood pumping too hard to care. Besides, him pulling her trousers open left little room for any kind of dignity. He was right, though: the gash was closing, liquid pooling at the tear in the leather, dripping into her reknitting skin. He dropped the empty bottle with a careless tinkle of broken glass on the rocks below, and rebuttoned her back up. “Ether, please?”

Amarant did not make any kind of sarcastic comment about her tardy use of *please*, which was just worrying, and he broke the neck off the vial on the rock and passed it to her with their arms all squashed between them. Careful of the jagged edges as he arched away from her to refit his claws, she drank the whole thing without stopping and pinched the bridge of her nose afterwards. Medicine rush. At least it wasn’t an Elixir. Those things were poison. They’d had to give Eiko a Megalixir once and she’d been drunk all afternoon with big dilated pupils and claimed she was the queen of the Mist Continent. The dragon was getting ready to flame again: there was a horrible smell of smoke and an appalling huffing sound from it, as if it was a toddler about to throw a tantrum. “Ready?”

“Been ready the last thirty seconds.” Underneath all the hair, there was a vicious grin and she shoved her helmet on so hard her brains rattled around. “Hurry it up, rat.”

“RARARARAWARARARARARARAAAAAA
A-OOOOOOHHH!”

“Give us a leg up —”

There was scrabbling with his hands on her thighs and trying to find her feet as she took the Dragon Hair in both hands, as he suddenly grunted and catapulted her upwards, as Freya Jumped. There was a bubble of fire and cat-sized flecks of oily spittle as the dragon furiously aimed at the first target to emerge: she felt her hair crackle and the air singed and thrust the pikehead down as hard as she could into the more fragile skin in the network of muscles at the wingbase. The dragon’s head whirled around to knock her away and hopefully seize her in its massive jaws, but she tugged the Hair free at the last minute and slipped out of range even as Amarant hauled himself out of the crack. She had found target. Sticky blood gushed out of the wound, spraying her face, the heavy leather of the wing battering her back and there he was on top of the head, riding like he was on an unbroken horse, the

dragon screaming and the heavy metal of his claws bright in the hot sunshine —

No use, not with dragonskull, and he was thrown off with the dragon bleeding heavily from the head and starting to look like a patchwork quilt with the patches peeling away. The right wing was sagging, the other ripped to pieces like a tattered cloak after Amarant's systematic shredding, her tossed nearly off the edge of the cliff over and over in her effort to find the heart from the back. There were green scales everywhere, as if they were beating a fish to death. Another scream, as she nimbly dodged the claws and struck at the back of the knee so that the creature buckled, with a horrible wet *splotch* as Amarant finally managed to gouge out an eye and the dragon reared. He was tossed into the side of the mountain, hit hard, and *slipped* off the rock more than fell. Everything was pocketed with gore, like plums in a really good fruitcake.

And all she knew was the rearing, the exposed breastbone, the hideous inevitability of the sternum trunk and the ribs — and she thrust anyway, a little to the left of the breast with her toeclaws sinking into the turf as she hit bone. Half-blinded and furious, she smelled the rank hot paraffin breath and saw the yellow teeth only one heart-dropping second

before the head was sucker-punched to sodding Condie Petie, before Amarant was there, and with the dragon screaming the mountain down he took the heft behind her and they shoved the Dragon Hair home.

Blood jetted. The head fell, knocked them both breathless and off their feet to the slippery ground, her helmet rolling away uselessly and Freya having to turn her head and gag as it hit her red and steaming right in the bared muzzle. The whole world was red, it was raining red, both of them soaked to the skin and her profoundly pink with her face buried in his chest and her arm feeling faintly dislocated and: the head whined, just once, and then it died.

The smell was appalling. Suddenly Amarant did something like a war-whoop, right in her ear and boneless beneath her, alive and hot and fairly simmering in dead fluid as she rolled to her side and *laughed*. They were triumphant, exhausted, absolutely *filthy*, and the joy of the defeat was like bubbly Alexandrian champagne: he shook off his claws to check for broken fingers and she heard it clunk heavily on the ground. Her knees were locked into his and she had the shakes, half potion-bends and half pure adrenaline, and his hair was slicked

back to his skull with the sticky stuff from where the cornea had burst and his eyes were dark like chocolate. And then they were touching like they couldn't stop.

It started with her claws caught in all that rough bright hair, heavy with it, and then his fingers were at the back of her head and pushing her towards him, and they were wholly caught in the mystery of how they were ever supposed to kiss. Their mouths tasted like dragon wounds and that was absolutely disgusting, and there he was with his lips on her muzzle and a slow clotting crust drying the short fur on her body maroon. Freya's mind recited a rather slow and rhythmic *you idiot, you idiot, you idiot*, as her hands were doing less slow and even less rhythmic things to his back and his sides and the skin underneath his rough waistcoat and he was *smooth*. She hadn't expected to be surprised at that — had she expected to be surprised? Amarant was utterly alien, not a little terrifying, and she was finding she suddenly wanted to rip him to pieces and cram him into her mouth with deep-buried and emotionally-constipated ardour. The kissing wasn't going neatly. It was an inutterably pleasant failure, and she wanted to try it over and over and over again.

Her ribs protested as the dragoon was flipped to her back, his hands on her — his fingers could span her forearms without trying, she felt arrestingly like a midget, she didn't *care* — and they stared at each other, wild-eyed and electrified, her tail trying to knot around his calf unbidden by her and barely making one revolution anyway. His expression was absolutely unreadable.

“You're trembling,” he muttered, and it was more an accusation and a little bit a furious snarl, and it was so deep from his chest it nearly lost itself.

“That's because I'm wet through and we're both lying in a bloody puddle of *dragon effluent*.”

The monk looked at her. Freya was red in places and pink in others, like Eiko trying to cook roast chicken. Her hair was an indescribable brown colour. She was singed and ripped and torn; a little bit broken, totally unappealing, smelling like a abattoir. “You are so fuckin' beautiful, Crescent,” he said, and then the touching began all over again, ceaseless and cinnamon and shocked.

(She only remembered afterwards how sticky it was, from the outset, both of them congealing and not too fussed about it; about sitting up, about his hands, about his fingers unbuttoning her coat and

pushing away her leathers, pushing up her undershirt, about his skin; beltbuckles, too little air and too many breaths, terrified and terrified of what exactly she was committing. If she was being tested, she did not pass. Neither of them passed. It was both of them hurting each other; not wanting to hurt each other; wanting to hurt each other, and desperately, as much as the entire concept of *wanting* in the first place as if it was all mixed up with the consuming hurt. His hand nudging her thin thighs apart. Her fingers like pinpricks on — and it just one fumble, like they were teenage boys, no goal but the sudden and mutual *this*, breeches shoved down to her knees and belts everywhere and the all-engulfing weight of his hands. Her own faltered, as she lost first: and she remembered that, him laughing, fingers between her legs. There was no solemnity, only a quiet and profound sense of yes. Freya did not forget.)

Out of all the mistakes she had ever made, that was the one she went into the most fearlessly.

They walked in silence to a lower plain of the mountain, to a small lake carved from geothermal movements long ago: an almost unreal blue from the rocks, clean and cold and sparkling in the afternoon

sunshine. They stripped naked — there was absolutely *no point* in attempting to be coy — and momentarily dyed the waters a sickly sort of red. (They'd been silent as Freya skinned large breadths of dragon-armour off the corpse, to be scraped and rolled later at the cave, the first of their trophies. Everybody could use dragonskin. Tomorrow she would lug the bones down.)

They washed in silence. They ate their slightly squashed lunch in silence. They then flopped into the sunshine in silence, by the grassy banks of the gently lapping waters, side by side and not touching as they stared with heavy-lidded eyes up at the scudding clouds. There was — almost a vortex inside her, afraid to feel, not guilty but *empty* with lack of reaction. She just felt as if she was fizzing all over like fruit-salts. Not afraid, just — slightly and absurdly shy, like she was a little girl. Just another Burmecian who waited for the entire dance to start with confession, with appropriate long moments set aside for appropriate maudlin longing just like in all of the stories.

“Hey,” he suddenly said, and he rolled over to his side, all the wet red dreadlocks of him and the sharp unlovely face; there was *more* of him without clothes, gleaming ripples of muscles, thighs like

bloody tree-trunks. All blue, blue like the water, that colour just on the edge of green in some lights and darknesses — it took her a while to catalogue his big, deceptively clumsy-looking body, right up until she could look him in the eye. (Freya wasn't to be blamed. He had rather arresting tattoos that she had never seen before. There was a particularly eye-catching one on his rear end which was all geometric and snakes with legs and old jailhouse ink. She was extremely proud of looking at *that* rather than — than **that**, because upon clinical re-observation, there were going to be some changes implemented. The cruellest but most appealing solution was sandpaper.) “Rat.”

“Yes?”

“Are you going to bullshit me?”

She had to turn her head to look at him, then, grave and slow and hardly herself: “I will never bullshit you so long as I live, starting now, ending never, Coral.”

“Liar,” he said. “C'mere.”

Something dissolved in her, and she did, rolling towards him in the cool shadow of his body until hardly any sunlight touched her. She had to smile,

just at him, just at *everything*, the way he used one of his heavy hands to tweak her ear, shoulder curled up in his with his arm slumping roughly over her waist in deliberately careless hold. “I suppose we both bullshit.”

“Yeah, I pinned that one the first time I laid eyes on you.”

“Like knows like.” Pause. “Are we going to have a long conversation now about our feelings?”

“If you want me to goddamn *drown myself*.”

“Don’t think I wouldn’t. You nicked off with two of my sandwiches. Did you think it would happen like this?”

“Hmph. I thought it’d involve us both havin’ hangovers in the morning, I guess.”

“So you’ve been waiting —”

“I’ve been waiting for a while,” he interrupted. “And I found out that I’d been waiting half a fuckin’ hour ago and you know how *you* feel, I know how *I* feel, and this is ‘feelings’ territory so *shut the hell up* and just agree to be lovers for as long as your legs don’t fall off or something.”

The silence was much more relaxed after that. Freya wanted to say: *I want you more truly than a lot of things I ever thought I wanted*. She wanted to say something flippant. She wanted to say something cavalier. He removed the need, and awkwardly stroked her hair, and she clung to him for one whole precious terrified minute before she folded at the waist and flopped over the top half of his body like a lizard to bask in the sun. There was a lot to be said about somebody else's body in the wake of her long independence: she heard Amarant breathe, slow and rocking like the waves on the lake, watched for his heartbeat and the blood rush through the network underneath his skin and slowly, exquisitely, felt his finger trace the heavy velvet round of her nipple with the rough pad of his thumb. The whole world was heavy and sweet and unreal. Not enough to last, and not enough to savour.

“D’you think we should start back?”

“Well,” he said, “Yeah, if you’re not up for sunburn,” and that was the start of — or at least an affirmation — of something, of them. There was no change. They walked side by side, the same as always; lugging the rolled-up skins between them with all the shadows growing blue and cool, the afternoon early evening-song and their clothes still

stiff with blood. It was a no-go talking point, not something to bother with, cut and dried and put away dismissively. They fought like glowering cats over dinner; he took whetstones to their weapons as she scraped the hides, rubbing them with salt and putting them on sticks at the back of their sandy little awful cave. But then, at the end of it all, the blanket was neutral territory, and his back was warm from the fire. For some reason, just as she was dozing off, she thought she kept on seeing him turn his head around and eye her as if he was making sure she was really there. She didn't dream. She did, however, wake up with sunburn.

And if you had to ask her afterwards, what changed, what she was gifted with, Freya would have found it hard to answer due to the world revolution: spectacularly awful tea in the mornings followed along with less spectacularly awful and strangely appealing sex, the whole world coloured furtive and secret, him still criticising her cooking and suddenly nearly breaking her ribs with his defiant embrace. Swearing. Him kicking at night. Foot-long strands of red hair in bloody *everything*. Laughing until your sides hurt. Still not getting told

anything she wanted him to tell her. In a way it was relief, and in another very real way, it was from that time that a panic began; a sort of clinging desperately to the first thing that had ever made her feel like *herself* again, to him, with the terrible knowledge of transience. She was bandaged, she was healthy, she wasn't thinking of Fratley as hard as she could and it was *all right*. She was all right again. She wanted to keep that.

And if you had to ask him afterwards, instead, all Amarant knew was: he had her, and she worried too much. Nothing else was worth a damn.

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